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B. A. LOVEJOY



ALICE
IN THE

PRISON OF HEARTS



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ALICE: PICK A CARD

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*To my five dearest friends and my Mother, without whom, I would never be
able to write a book.*

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PROLOGUE: THREE YEARS, SIX MONTHS,
NINE DAYS, ELEVEN HOURS, AND TEN
MINUTES AGO—IF MEMORY SERVES

The sitting room was crowded with plates and presents. The dimmed lights shone on discarded pieces of parchment paper sitting on nearly every surface as well as the parting gifts set not that far from them, an assortment of various letters and trinkets—objects left to us by our father on the off chance that he did not come back. At that time, it was merely an off chance and far from a real possibility.

We didn't realize that he would not be returning, or that that night would be the last he would see of Oxford. We didn't even know where he was going at that moment. No one could have imagined the reality; the concept of talking cats and dancing flowers were far from real in our world, and places like Wonderland simply didn't exist.

Places like Wonderland simply couldn't exist.

And so, we held onto the hope that he would be like any other soldier and return home. Thousands had left already, after all, and we were promised that they would return soon, that the war would be over almost as quickly as it had started—but unbeknownst to us, my father was going to a far different place than the other British soldiers, and he was going alone.

Perhaps he knew that his chances of coming back were slim, and that was why he humored our theatrics... it was better for my sister and I's sake, as well as our mother's, though she didn't look like she believed any of it.

My mother looked like she'd rather be scrubbing grout as she sat there glowering in the corner and leveled my father with the occasional glare. Colored tissue paper hung from the walls behind her and notes written in

adoration sat on the table beside her, but my mother looked like she could have choked the man she called her husband. Like if my sister and I weren't in the way, she would have stormed across the room and dragged him by the ear out onto the lawn to shout at him like she had the night before, throwing her heels at him and screaming to high heaven that he hadn't the faintest idea what he was doing.

It was strange, because I really thought she'd have gotten over it by the time of the party, but just an hour before she had tied his best tie just a little too tight and given him a scowl that almost dared him to say something.

My mother could be a bit odd like that, so my sister and I just had to make up for it, drowning him with affection and telling him how he was the very best father a man could be while doing our best to ignore the way that my mother murmured insults under her breath.

She really wasn't in the mood.

Riotous laughter poured out of my father and I as we spun, and his hand reached out to pull Mary into the fray, her high, lilting laughter joining in the merriment as in the background the large, wooden radio in the living room continued to blare; the likes of the Andrews Sisters, Jack Buchanan, and Glenn Miller spilling out through the speaker, lifting our spirits and causing my mother to silently bob her rolled cigarette to the beat. Upon the coffee table sat sausage rolls, wrapped prunes, egg and cress sandwiches, and savory cheese scones—all my father's favorites, of course, as he never had much of a sweet tooth.

My mother would normally not cater to him in such a way, but all things considered? A going away party was the place for such indulgences; she had even allowed my sister and I to hang paper garlands made from my father's far older notes from the walls—which seemed later on like more of a morose celebration of his leaving traditional academia for the unknown. Though, in retrospect I suppose be it war or Wonderland, he was doing just that.

The smell of smoke hung in the air, my mother's lipstick was smeared, and my father's collar appeared slightly rumpled—which I did not think much of at that moment but would reflect upon for years to come. I always assumed that at the last moment, right before my father walked out the door, my mother had apologized and the two had made up. Perhaps she had regretted being angry, I knew I would have. I would always wonder about

the crinkle in the corner of my mother's eyes and the flakes of black mascara upon her cheeks. I would think of the way that she smoked near endlessly that day and for days prior; I would think about the yellow tint that stained the edges of her pink nails, and the way that days afterwards, upon nicking one of them rolling a cigarette, I saw her cut them short for the first time in my life as she cursed under her breath, her eyes glued upon a rare photograph of my father as she shook her head to herself.

Pretend that you did not see that, Alice, she said, and I did, indulging myself in the delusion that the two of them had come to terms before he left.

It was easier then to indulge in optimistic delusions; like my mother would have bothered to apologize to my father the night he left, or my father would go away for only a matter of months, a year at most, and the war would soon come to an end. That night I pretended his laugh would not be the last one I would hear from him or that, a year later, I would not see my mother tearing through his papers in the middle of the night, destroying his office as she searched for a deck of cards in his desk; one that she ripped into with trembling hands. I pretended not to see as she sought the pack out and tore up every single card, stomping them harshly into the ground before staring at the man on the white paper box and throwing it into the fireplace with the speed and accuracy of a professional cricket player.

No. Certainly I did not see that, because if I had seen that, I would lie in my bed years later wondering what it meant, and what she knew. Perhaps I'd remember it in a fit once while resting in another land, staring up at my ceiling and telling myself that it couldn't be true before turning on my side and returning to the more concrete portions of my memories, the ones I had chosen not to forget.

The ones in which my father, tall and grey, continued to say goodbye.

"One for Eleanor," he insisted as the song drew to a close, his face somehow gravely serious despite the fact that in front of him his two self-proclaimed favorite girls were laughing, their eyes alight with joy and their hands still desperately tugging on him. The fact that he somehow managed to deny us was a mystery. I watched as he walked past us and stuck his hand out to my mother, reaching to lace his fingers through hers before she could roll another cigarette. "Dance with me, Eleanor," he said, and I thought I saw his hand tremble.

Her eyes met his, there was a sharpness to her features but also a vulnerability that I would rarely see again, a thawing of who she was.

“The love of my life,” my father said, and suddenly that all went away as she shook her head sharply at him, pulling him into her as she stood up in front of him and whispered some unknown words into his ear.

“You should dance with your daughters again,” was the only audible thing she said, but when her eyes moved to the two of us, she changed her tone, swallowing as she saw our waning smiles.

That morning, she had told Mary that she reminded her of my father, patient and caring. I was insulted and asked her what I reminded her of as I stood there in my fitted blue dress, my hands clenched at my side, and my face defiant as I waited for her to tell me the same— that I was like my father, and she adored that about me.

As she looked at me in that moment, with my father’s hand outstretched in front of her and my stare unwavering upon her as I dared her to deny him, I wondered if she remembered what she had told me, if Mary and I’s opinions mattered a little more because of it.

You unfortunately remind me of myself, Alice, she had said, and there was more than an ounce of pity to it that made me furious. I wanted to be like my father, not her. I would do anything to not be like my mother, a doe eyed socialite who had become taken with her family’s gardener’s boy and watched him during every major social event. Sure, she had ended up marrying my father, which was rather intelligent of her considering the fact that other, far richer men must have seemed more enticing than the son of the poorest of her family’s hired help; but my mother was ditzy and small minded in my opinion. She always had been.

I wanted to be determined and smart, calculating and strategic. Nothing like my housewife mother, who had come from money and had somehow convinced her reluctant husband to pursue far more financially adequate careers as a result.

Surely, she must have known it at that moment. Surely, she must have known how I wanted to be compared to him and not her when she stared my sister and I down in that foyer, finally relenting when I wrinkled my nose in disappointment at her reaction to him.

“A dance,” she said softly, her voice wavering as he more insistently held out his hand. “Just one,” and yet she frowned all the same and acted

as if she'd have rather wrung his neck. "I suppose you owe me that, Reginald."

He nodded, likely knowing that he was in trouble. "Then we should make it worthwhile," he said, his fingers flexing around hers as if she would slip right through his grip, his body moving even closer to her, so close that his breathing moved the wispy strands of hair strewn across her forehead as she swallowed audibly. Her eyes traveled his person as if she could memorize him in that single second, and she shook her head as he spoke again. "This isn't goodbye, Eleanor."

"No, you and I will never get that, will we?" She said, and there was almost a dare hiding within those words, a slight lilt to her tone that challenged him to tell her otherwise. He didn't, of course, as people never challenged my mother, but he did look in her eyes with a gaze so intense that it almost seemed he looked right through her. Her blue, narrowed eyes did the same as she looked back defiantly, and his hand tightened around hers, the silver of his wedding band gleaming in the firelight.

A thousand unsaid words crossed between their stare, and yet my sister could only say one thing...

"I want to be loved like that," Mary whispered as my mother's hand rose to my father's shoulders, her eyes rimmed with tears and the softest snuffle escaping her as my father's hand rested upon the small of her back and the corners of his eyes crinkled as she whispered something in his ear.

"I'm sure Peter will give you that," I whispered as my sister and I stood to the side of the room, a sort of bitterness filling me as the small golden ring, one passed down for generations in Peter's family, glistened upon my sister's finger and my parents smiled at each other—reminding me that I was the one who was alone, as I always had been. "You're the type to marry," I remarked, knowing that I was not the type—some of us were not made for love. I likely was one of them, seeing as how I'd only fallen in love once and there he was, marching off to marry my sister.

The bitterness, however, was short lived when my sister turned around, the corners of her mouth lifting, a knowing smile painted across her features. "It may not be now," she said, a slight laugh playing in my older sister's voice as the sweet tones of Doris Day began to fill the air. "And it may not be here—but some day you will be too, if you want it," she said with an air of certainty that I had thought only my father owned as she presented her hand to me, "for now, however, you will just have to settle

for me,” she said, and though I was certain that a biting comment lingered somewhere near the back of my throat, and that the gold of her wedding band would irritate me—I couldn’t help but hesitantly sigh as I placed my hand in hers, a smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

It was the same smile that would tug on my lips a year later when I danced with her when the father daughter dance came up at her wedding. It would pull at me when my mother stood behind me and pulled my hair back from my face months after that, swearing that the boys in town were blind. It would bloom fully when I would sit on Peter’s couch and let my head fall back, laughing at the essays he read out loud to my sister and I even as jealousy prickled at the back of my mind.

And it would insistently yank at the corner of my mouth when I would sit beside Kaeden Hart years later, my legs crossed primly at the ankles as a familiar pink hue climbed up the back of his neck while I watched him read; thoughts of my father, of the way that he looked at me while he danced with my mother, and how his hands tightened around her fading away as I reached up to kiss Kaeden’s cheek in a rare moment of intimacy—indulging myself during one of the few moments in which no one else truly knew where the two of us were.

As I watched Kaeden smile, I slowly began to forget how it felt to say goodnight to my father that day, unknowing that the next morning I would not wake up in time to say goodbye to him. When Kaeden put down his book and looked at me fully, I forgot the silent pride I felt when I watched Peter accept his faculty position, or how I missed the gardens of Oxford. And when a laugh escaped Kaeden’s lips, I forgot how it felt for that brief moment when my mother spoke up for me against the Glenshires.

“You can’t wait for me to finish the page, can you?” Kaeden remarked, his hand rising to his cheek as he looked over at me, the sight of the rosy hue on his skin feeling like some grand indulgence to me as his hand collected mine from where it sat upon my thigh.

“I assure you,” I remarked in that one hazy moment, looking as innocent as I could. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I said, but his fingers wove through mine as he insistently tugged me closer.

I laughed as he firmly held on to me, and his hand pulled mine to his lips while his eyes lingered on me.

I forgot everything but him and the way that my heart beat so loudly underneath his stare. I was enamored by the way that his mouth ghosted

over the thin skin on the back of my hand as he gave it a light kiss, and the way that I could see him begin to fall deeper and deeper down a rabbit hole that I also found myself spiraling into. "Alice," he said then in a different time and a different place than my family, but so warmly that it made me feel the same sense of comfort and home, "we should be dancing," he proclaimed, as if that were a logical statement and he was not just another lovesick fool. "If you don't dance when you're happy in Wonderland, you risk an outbreak of dancing that could happen at the most unfortunate of times. If it's bad enough, it will infect everyone," he said, and it very easily could have been a lie, but I'd learned to accept nearly everything I heard when it came to Wonderland. Especially when it came from him.

I always believed Kaeden.

I laughed. I smiled. I let him take my hand in his with a grin, and I kicked his thigh in insistence. "Then we should be dancing, shouldn't we?" I said, and he obliged, perhaps urged on by the infrequency of moments of privacy like that and enchanted by the way I looked at him with puckered lips.

Home played a song from a small, wooden music box as I stood in front of Kaeden, my fingers weaving together behind his neck, and his lips pressing lightly against mine. Not once, not twice, perhaps endlessly as he danced with me, pulling back every so often to provide a laugh or smile, and sending my heart soaring in the process, any hint of sensibility far from my mind's shore.

"I think you are the finest whatchamacallit dancer I have ever met," Kaeden murmured as we continued our uncultured, unguided waltz, and I adored it when he smiled, just as I adored it when the cuckoo bird in the wooden clock whistled inconspicuously, and the paintings in their frames sighed enviously. I adored the way that Wonderland felt like home, and I almost thought I belonged, that I had found my place just as my parents had once found theirs.

For a moment, I forgot everything else, it was just him and I; I forgot about my mother dancing in the sitting room with my father just before his departure, with my father's pesky playing cards tucked just out of sight as she smiled at him one last time.

I laughed just as I did with Mary and stomped twice as clumsily. I spun endlessly and smiled fondly, and I kissed him back again and again just as

he did me. “Promise me that someday, there will be no hiding, no sneaking,” I asked him, knowing that the Crown Court would be done with thinking of kings soon enough and the rumors that swirled around the two of us would someday go away as well as the waiting for an announcement of marriage or something. “That you and I will not have to live our lives in secret,” I told him, and he silenced me with a single kiss in that moment, which I told myself was because he was just so moved.

I could be sentimental and sappy every now and again. Especially when it came to kissing Kaeden, even if I had never felt the urge to be so before.

He made me dream, which was invaluable in a world already so full of impossible things. Behind my eyes danced beautiful, red accented palaces and large libraries, gorgeous dresses, and tender arms wrapped around me until the end of time—I didn’t dare speak those ideas to him, but I dreamed them all the same. We would have a glorious, brilliant ending—one with another man on the Cards throne, and the Joker standing endlessly in the pillory...

Perhaps that wasn’t Kaeden’s dream, but it was mine.

Perhaps his dreams were simpler, more mundane. Perhaps they were of children or promises. Perhaps they were of nights spent lying together, his limbs tangled up in mine and his mouth pressed firmly to my crown.

“I love you,” he whispered for that single perfect moment, the one where the Jabberwock didn’t exist and the Clock Turning was far from beginning—and it didn’t matter.

Nothing he said mattered, not anymore—because the truth came into play just weeks later.

All of it faded away when that same man, the King of Hearts, took a step towards me in a crowded room as a glittering mirror shined dimly behind me, and a tenacious court called for my head. Then, as his lips parted and struggled to find the words to explain in front of everyone and everything, a golden chain hanging limply from his hands—it all came back like a flash of lightning—

And suddenly, as his mouth closed once more and tears brimmed his eyes, I wondered how I could have dreamed of staying in Wonderland in the first place, and how I could have been so stupid as to fall for someone who I always knew would be trouble to begin with—

Because Kaeden Hart was my enemy all along—and I was utterly, hopelessly, ridiculously in love with him.

Which made me the biggest fool in all of Wonderland.

THE BIGGEST FOOL IN WONDERLAND

I didn't have to look to know they were watching. I could feel their eyes peering out from the balconies and windows surrounding me, and even if I hadn't felt their stares, I would have still known they were there watching me. They were all watching me. Ever since the day I was bound to Hearts by the Crown Court and commanded to remain on the estate, everyone had been watching me, egged on by the myth that I had been the one to orchestrate the Jabberwock's attack.

A myth that the Crown Court and Thomas Caard did nothing to dissuade. My hands tightened at the very memory as I bit down on my lip and tried my best to even my temper. I failed at that, of course, and soon gave up, deciding to stop panting and start moving. Lamenting never did much of anything.

Long, wooden splinters dug into my palm as I swung once again, forming an arc like the ones I had seen just hours before during the Card Guards' sword practice and promptly missed my target.

Again.

The tall, wooden dummy that stood in front of me's painted mouth twitched just a centimeter higher at the corner, pulling the dried lead paint to the point that it was peeling off as the makeshift scarecrow looked down at my pathetic tools, mocking me as he usually did—

Only this time with the added benefit of my unskilled swing further cracking the remainder of my stolen wooden sword in the process, and me dropping said sword as well for added measure—because there was truly nothing embarrassing about that. No, not at all. Not when I had watched the Card Guards perform their simple routines flawlessly just hours before

that very morning, and turned down the offers of help from nearly all the Cards on the Hearts Estate. I'd long since realized that their help was, for the most part, a ruse, and I would end up ungodly sore and disappointed mere hours later when a number two card, of all rankings, beat me to a near pulp on the lawn, leaving far too many bruises that looked like the red roses that practically covered the place. My spirits were on the ground.

Instinctually, I looked up only to realize that my sword had not entirely left my hands, unfortunately, and only the handle still remained.

Lovely.

My eyes scanned across the third-floor balconies for just a moment, and I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I found them full of people I didn't know. A blessing, really, I counted myself as lucky for a single moment until the clapping began.

I sighed in frustration; clapping was never good. Especially not in the Land of Hearts. Just the other day, the Queen of Hearts had wandered away from her handlers and applauded my efforts, thinking me to be a young, rather poorly dressed boy trying to be a knight. I knew right away that it wasn't her, however, because if it were, the claps would have been much quicker and I would have heard her stifled chortle; which left one person.

The one person I wanted to see the least in Wonderland.

At least the Queen of Hearts would have driven the others away, forcing them to avert their eyes and scurry down the halls out of fear—but him? He attracted attention now more than ever, and he kept it.

Kaeden always held my attention.

If scarecrows could laugh, I believe they'd sound a lot like the creak from the bucket atop the head of my new 'friend,' considering the fact that it had made nearly the same sound almost every day for the past two weeks as it watched me fail over and over again. My eyes snapped up to follow the scarecrow's and I was unsurprised when they immediately landed on Kaeden. There was no one else that it could be.

"Are you mocking me?" I murmured; my question inaudible as I scowled up at him.

Whether or not that was his intention, I did not truly know, as I did not happen to know any of said king's intentions anymore, nor even him at that point. For all I knew, Kaeden's straight-faced, raised brow composure was not actually an acknowledgement of the effort that I'd put in, but rather a painful mockery of my failure, one that he hid behind his

supposedly ‘shy’ demeanor. His only good point was that he was nice to look at, which really, was a shame but pretty true to the way the world worked—the worst people were always unfortunately the most good looking.

I did not trust him as far as I could throw him anymore, which, I suppose, was why it shouldn’t have come as a surprise that one of the Duchess’s beautiful, doting girls was standing beside him when I whirled around on my foot to face him—impatiently tapping her toes as he leaned over the edge of the balcony to watch me, but still.

It was somehow worse that she was there. She was pretty. She probably had the patience to stand beside him and wait for the rare sentence that escaped his lips. All of them did. They acted like he was so interesting, despite the fact that they hardly even knew him at all.

“Then again, I hardly knew him either,” I sighed, my shoulders sinking just an inch as I struggled to keep my composure and returned his stare with a proper glare.

My frown flickered when his eyes locked on mine, the corner of his mouth falling as he inevitably realized the depth of my failure and that I didn’t find it funny at all. He probably saw the hilt still in my hands and the scarecrow devoid of a single dent.

Kaeden had definitely noticed the fact that I had failed to acquire a teacher, despite my insistence that this be the groundbreaking hobby to break through the mind-numbing mundanity of my time in the Land of Hearts. I shot him a defiant look as he gave an awkward swallow, his hands locking on the balcony as the girl beside him reached for his arm to pull him along.

“Won’t you show me the gardens?” I mocked, because they always said that. “Go step on poison ivy, you prat. It would suit you well enough.” My eyes broke away from Kaeden’s as I gave my scarecrow a defiant kick, only to find that my toes didn’t appreciate it all that much, and that the pain of cracking them against the wooden frame made me grit my teeth. “I hope someone burns down your stupid little gardens and has the foresight to do it with you two in it,” I muttered, doing my best to stand through the pain as I set my tender foot down on the ground and tried to stand normally, staring at the hedges with accusations dancing behind my eyes.

The Duchess’s girls loved the gardens, they loved walking with Kaeden, they loved navigating the maze and ‘stumbling’ into him even

when he refused to even touch them at all. They dreamed of running into the Queen in said gardens and somehow wooing her with their perfection, convincing Kaeden that they were perfect for him with her help. Never mind the fact that she never remembered their names. I watched them from my window day after day as I listened to the chiming of a faraway clock, wondering if I had ever looked so foolish and stupid and so utterly in love—

He had likely told these new girls all of those ‘secret’ things he had told me by now. He was so quick to show his cards, and perhaps even quicker to ‘fall.’ He had probably only known this one an hour and had already begun to—

“You’re letting your thoughts get away from you once more, Alice,” Thomas remarked in my ear. “Daydreaming about me again?” He asked, and for all I tried to remain composed and respectable in front of the King of Hearts and the members of the Crown Court, I stumbled, inadvertently bringing all eyes back to me after I had only just narrowly escaped the various judges and jurors who darted through the halls—another thing I did not want.

“I’d rather eat dirt.”

“Now, is that something you should say to your devoted guard?” Thomas asked, his hand reaching out for me and not dropping even when I shrugged away from his touch. “Especially with the Caterpillar and the Crown Court watching,” he said, and I didn’t so much as bother to look up to check whether they were there or not before I rolled my eyes.

“Oh please, the Caterpillar pays other people to watch me,” I said to him, flicking at the embroidered red six on his uniform and reminding him of his recent demotion, “like you.” The teasing smile on Thomas’s face widened, but I swore I could see the irritation simmering beneath his skin. “Who do you think the Crown Court will promote next to elusive role of Joker?” I asked him as I began to walk away, content to prod him as much as possible. If I could not be alone, then I would make him miserable whenever he was within my company, exacting my revenge through roundabout means.

Between Kaeden, the Crown Court he had invited to take up residence in his humble abode, and my newly minted, sorely disappointed guard I had seldom a single moment to myself. I felt more spectacle than woman at that point, and the various covered walkways and balconies jutting from

the walls of the rounded courtyard of Hearts Estate did not help things very much.

Nor did the fact that I was, technically, all things considered, a prisoner.

A special one, thankfully gifted with rooms and my own bed by sole virtue of being a king's 'favorite,' but that did not change much.

"Your trial won't go well if you stomp around like that, you know people find angry young women rather unappealing," Thomas informed me. "It makes it look like I'm doing a bad job."

"Yes, well, I'll try to smile more so you can get promoted."

"That's all I ask," Thomas said, failing to sense my sarcasm. Or maybe if he had, he chose to ignore it, which would have been just like him.

"I hope they demote you all the way down to two, you insufferable bastard," I muttered, clenching my hands so tightly that the splinters from the hilt of my broken sword dove somehow even deeper beneath my flesh.

I yearned for the clock tower, for Home, for the smell of ammonia and the reek of rusty metal clockwork—perhaps I even yearned for Oxford as well. Returning to England would have been a preferable end to my story, though I had to admit that I still felt my chest tighten when I looked back at Kaeden and the way that he lingered on the balcony, still watching me from afar even though other, far more lively young maidens did their best to pull him away.

But I was working on that; taking the medicine prescribed to me and swearing to myself that, at the end of the day, I would not love Kaeden Hart.

I swore that to myself fairly often those days, as seeing him nearly every waking hour did not help very much in the way of not wanting him—he was still dreadfully handsome, and unbearably funny.

I had no idea how to stop wanting him.

Sometimes I dreamed about sneaking into his room and choking him in the middle of the night, but Kaeden always woke up the second my hands went to his throat and looked at me with those big, dark eyes as he carefully pressed a kiss to each of my wrists. It was hard to wake up at that point in my dream, before he whispered my name and rolled me onto my back, but I managed to do it, waking up with actual steam rolling off my face and the distinct urge to scream gnawing at the back of my mind.

It was hard to hate someone like Kaeden.

It was comparatively easy to hate someone like Thomas.

“I should put a bell on you. It would make it easier to know when I’m supposed to put on a show,” I remarked, dragging my eyes away before they could make contact across the courtyard with the King of Hearts and doing my best to school my body language of any emotion, even if my reddened face reeked of embarrassment. I simply told myself that it could be misunderstood as anger from afar by those who did not know me well enough, and Kaeden most certainly did not know me well enough. Not anymore.

Thomas, however...

Thomas snorted as my attention fell back to him, his hazel eyes dancing with mirth and that same stupid crooked smile tugging upon his lips as he unabashedly looked me up and down, taking his job as guard seriously in a way that far more often than not annoyed me. His eyes landed on the hilt within my grip immediately, of course, and it was no sooner than they did that than I dropped it down to the ground, casting him a defiant glare that almost dared him to say something.

Unfortunately, he did.

“Are you going to ask for a new one this time or just wait?” Thomas asked just a heartbeat later, and if he thought I looked angry before, I could not imagine how I looked then. Not that Thomas ever took any notice of that. “You know you would be able to get far more if you batted your pretty little lashes and begged.”

Disgusting.

“I will bat my pretty little lashes to get a proper metal blade and then strike you with it,” I remarked, kicking the handle away from my feet before changing direction in a futile effort to lose Thomas. I turned back on my heel just quick enough to see Kaeden finally look away, giving into to the girl beside him’s tender touch, and I wished that I had kept walking in the other direction. “I doubt injury would discharge you to your previous position. You’d likely still be stuck with me and I with you day after day until this trial comes to an end. Do you truly wish to better arm me?” I asked, only to hear Thomas chuckle.

I hated his raucous laugh.

I hated his stupid hazel eyes and his abundance of freckles. The way that he scrunched his nose and his light brown hair that was always

perfectly coifed. I hated how he guarded me and yet acted as my friend—I'd sooner choke Thomas in his sleep than spend time with him.

The Caterpillar knew that. Kaeden knew that. I had made it obvious, but Thomas and I were both being punished, and so...

I momentarily daydreamed about running for the fence at the edge of the estate again even as it vanished from sight, but I knew how that would go. I would run at the barrier and then end up landing in another odd part of the estate again. My room, a study, the Walrus's temporary bathtub—once or twice I'd even ended up at the King's bedroom door, and a flurry of guards had thought I'd come to kill him.

I really did wish that I was in the dungeons at that moment, rather than free to run about. Even if the dungeons were held over my head as some grand punishment, I could not help but wonder how much worse they could actually be when compared with my current reality.

"All I'm saying is that your life would be much easier if you chose to capitalize on the King's little crush," Thomas rebutted, and I felt strangely sick at the idea. Even more ill than I felt when the girls claspings at Kaeden's arms pushed their perfect little lips against his cheek.

Awful, I could taste how bitter I was in the back of my mouth as I looked away, catching a glance of the girl of the day holding his upper arm. I could feel my eyes burn in that sort of awful, maddening way, the one where tears really do want to spill over, but I managed to force them back. "I'm not capitalizing on him," I replied, as I felt deeply saddened by the idea of it all—of Kaeden's eyes brightening if I gave him any regard, and the way that he would smile if I were to lean too close to him, looking far more alive than he had in a little over a month. All while not knowing that I was doing it for my own benefit, and that I was using him—"Don't mention him anymore," I commanded, and decided then and there that it was not my imagination, and the courtyard was indeed stretching out in front of me, as if Ava, the Heart's estate, could prevent me from approaching Kaeden with nefarious intent by making my walks longer.

I'd have to take a whole bottle of lovesickness medicine that night, and hope that Ava wouldn't say anything as she refilled it for the umpteenth time that week, raising her eyebrows at me from one of the picture frames in my loaned bedroom.

I hated Kaeden and yet I could not bear to use him. I detested him, and yet I could not bear to bat my lashes at him, to touch his knee and see that

light in his eyes of which I was so fond, to let him hold me and praise me, brushing the loose hairs from in front of my eyes.

And all for what? A better room and a newer sword?

And that was if he still loved me; or ever had to begin with.

I couldn't stomach doing that—even to him.

Even to awkward, beautiful Kaeden Hart. A man with fake sweetness in his eyes and a lilting laugh, with long limbs and a knowing smile—A man who I professed to love.

“Do not say such stupid things again,” I barked at Thomas, since just telling him not to do things didn't feel like enough. I had to insult him as well. At least to appease the estate and stop the courtyard from stretching out any further. The moment I did that, the grass squeezed together and the walk shortened; though I did almost trip over a mound of sod as a result.

To his credit, Thomas did not respond, which was good, very good, considering he could very well have, and if he had, I would have lost what little grip on myself I had only recently regained.

I swore to myself that I would not be crying over Kaeden Hart.

I would be storming across the yard and doing my best to cast him as far out of my troubled mind as possible. I would be ignoring him at every opportunity and doing the things he so loathed, then trying not to notice when he looked down at me with a heartbroken smile and begging eyes. I would be working on the problem of trying to get back home while knowing that he had a way locked within the very castle that I was imprisoned within, but not daring to ask him the reason why—why on earth would he keep it from me?

But I would not be crying over Kaeden Hart. Not then, at least. Not while my mind was far too preoccupied with other things, such as the movement of the Crown Court and the concerning nature of the man who was cursed to follow me until the end of time. It was hard to think of broken hearts when Thomas Caard was in the mix, with secrets dancing behind his large, glassy hazel eyes.

I tried to school my breathing as I walked away, clenching my hands close to me as Thomas trailed not that far behind and I watched a familiar, awful sight begin again the moment that I entered the open hallways of the Heart's Estate; a dark, emerald green hue beginning at my palms and branching its way up my wrists.

Only in Wonderland did envy have a list of visible symptoms.

And only in Wonderland was it the only ailment without a cure.

Without a second thought, I reached into the pockets of my dress and withdrew the small, white cotton gloves Fitzgerald had gifted to me not that long ago. The ones that he had told me to wear, because he couldn't stand to see my skin turn green any longer, and it vexed him as to why I would have anything to be jealous of to begin with.

Of note was the fact that I had noticed that his hands looked very similar to mine, and when I turned to look up at him, he had pulled the edge of his sleeve down lower, his pale skin going red as he immediately excused himself.

I tugged them on then, my eyes drifting to the ground as I tried to temper myself. I would die from this, I was sure— I could only hope that the various people tromping through the halls in Hearts didn't look my way. The last thing I needed was for someone to notice me—

“—Jealousy really doesn't suit you,” a low voice hummed in my ear almost immediately, and I cursed every Kingdom in Wonderland. Luck was never on my side.

“Be quiet, Claude,” I remarked, unsurprised to find that he was there when I needed him least, and that he stood as near as always, not even close to struggling to keep up. “You're three hours late,” I remarked, “I very nearly had to talk to the Caterpillar because of you.”

He chuckled as he slid into place beside me, matching me step for step. “My apologies. I did tell him I didn't care to talk to him today as I find he is much too boring,” Claude shrugged as if that were reason enough, “it's not my fault he didn't listen.”

“Nothing is ever your fault,” I mumbled. I forgot that Claude had a tendency to just show up out of thin air, and that he seemed so well in touch with what moments I wanted him to appear least at, his body almost always coming into view when I felt at my lowest.

I felt his lips press against my cheek and I was forced to stop and turn, regarding him for a moment, not thinking to school the misery from my features or to ready myself first.

If I wanted to hate Kaeden, then I really, really wanted to hate Claude.

But, for some reason, I couldn't bear to, even when I was mad at him; and the man he had hidden in his palace trailed not that far behind us. Something about Claude made people naturally want to like him—perhaps now more than ever.

Perhaps it was the smile that he gave at that moment, or the way his arm spread out for me to walk beside him. It could have had something to do with the warm air and gentle breeze that almost always surrounded him, making him feel like a summer's night.

Or maybe it was because of the scars.

The long, black scars with scabs that still flaked off of them. They marred his face and upper body, ripping through his ears and previously perfect features. Jaxton had left them when Claude had thrown himself in front of him, desperate to save Roisin and to stop the locket containing Manon from being similarly mauled as the pendant was broken beyond repair. Perhaps I still felt guilty because of his uneven breaths, or the gauze still wrapped tightly around his waist, the smell of apples heavily permeating the air around him as he refused the care of doctors and sought desperately to keep them away.

Or perhaps it was the way he looked at Thomas, his eyes still firm and trusting, but with just a hint of uncertainty in his gaze. That made me feel guilty as well, though Claude often tried to blink the concern away the moment that I so much as glimpsed it on his features.

I didn't know if he believed Thomas had done it or not, or whether he was of the same opinion as the courts who had decided that I was to blame, and I was never alone with him long enough to ask. A part of me suspected that even if I was, it would have hurt to see his reaction just at hearing me ask the question.

Claude came to visit me day after day, even when I first refused to so much as acknowledge him, he came, and he waited.

Waited, waited, and waited for me to be his friend again.

A whole month had come and gone, and our friendship was never fully rekindled—or so I told myself as I walked into his waiting arm, burying my face in his scarred chest for a moment before wrapping my arm around his waist and beginning to walk again.

“Tried sword fighting again?” Claude asked as I gave a petulant huff, one that disguised the slightest of sniffles as he pressed me into his side, his hand raising and his arm angling to keep me far from view when small prickles of moisture began to pattern my skin. “The sword won today, I take it?”

Oh bugger, I had sworn I would not cry.

“Would you believe I broke it?” I remarked, my voice uneven as my eyes stayed directed towards the ground, and beside me, he gave a warm laugh.

“I’ll speak to Kaeden about getting you a new one again,” he replied, only to catch my eyes sliding in his direction. “—I mean, I’ll see to Kaeden about getting you a new one for the very first time, as that one has never been replaced before. Not once,” he said, stiffening ever so slightly as he guided me along, obviously holding another secret within his chest and choosing to keep it in. Even if I already knew that Kaeden had replaced the sword more than once. “Though perhaps after the trial ends today, maybe you could try to talk to him yourself—” he began, and just as suddenly averted his eyes, catching the menace in my gaze. “Right,” he said, immediately accepting the rejection of his idea. “I don’t know why I thought otherwise,” he said, pulling me into his side just a little tighter. “I’m happy to go with you again,” he said. “Even if we will be remarkably late.”

“As always,” I responded, my eyes drifting up to look at the palace in front of us, and then cutting back to catch a glimpse not only of Kaeden, but my guard as well.

Thomas’s eyes did not move from mine. They did not so much as blink.

“I have a surprise for you today,” Claude began to prattle at my side, unaware of how I stared at the man behind me, or the fear I felt holding the Joker’s eyes. “We’re one step closer to keeping you from standing trial, which is good, all things considered, since it is Wonderland and we generally tend to assume guilt first, innocence second...” he admitted, shaking his head as he continued to complain about the dubious fairness of the justice system, completely ignorant as to how Thomas dominated my thoughts.

I could not help but think that Thomas must have been so close to getting what he wanted—and it was only because of a single decree that he was now trailing behind me, waiting for the day when the trials would end and his old life would start anew, or perhaps more freedom would be allocated to him...

The thought of that sent chills down my spine, and I swore to myself that I would never trust Thomas again.

ALICE GOES TO COURT—AGAIN

Perhaps the most unsettling part about my situation was how often Thomas tried to hide his displeasure, masking it with false smiles and cheerful words, and how effective his act was at convincing the Crown Court, at the very least, that he was more than pleased with his situation—that he didn’t begrudge them a bit for leading him to believe that he would be reinstated to his previous position as the Joker of Cards in return for his betrayal and ultimate set up of Chess.

Anyone who knew him well could see he was displeased. Anyone who was smart enough to look beyond his bright eyes and wide smiles could see the irritation pricking at the very corner of his being, and the way that he was constantly calculating a way out, a way to return to the old status quo... or maybe even advance to a far better status, one that would result in an elevation of his standing within Cards. You could see the unspoken ambition dancing behind his eyes and clenched tightly within his knotted fists.

His displeasure hung in the air like humidity on a summer’s day, and sometimes you could feel it so strongly that the depths of his anger clung to your skin when you least expected it, especially when we traveled through the Hearts’ Estate walls. The whole of Wonderland looked back at him, a few tittering young girls with mouse ears and tails whispering rumors about him. Despite the constant smirk that hung from his lips, those who knew him could easily spot the cracks in his sunshiny demeanor as the people of Wonderland did what they knew best—they talked.

They talked so much that around nearly every corner was a new rumor or theory about him, and in my opinion, very few were all that far off. I

could hear them even then, as the mouse girls tried to keep their voices low and their eyes angled away from us, as if that would somehow make him less likely to know they were speaking about him.

I heard he committed high treason.

I heard he plotted with the Jabberwock.

Yes, well, *I heard he doesn't add milk to his tea*—It was interesting what sort of crimes people thought him guilty of, as never in all of Wonderland had a Joker been demoted, especially not to the position of a lowly number six playing card. It was scandalous, it was suspicious, and most of all it was a spectacle, and Wonderland loved spectacles.

The only reason that anyone could agree on when it came to Thomas's demotion was that it most certainly had something to do with me, the Alice that the Crown Court found themselves so obsessed with. Even as we walked through the halls with little time to spare before the daily trials began once again, a member of the Caterpillar's entourage passed us by and caught Thomas's eyes, and I imagined that the judge's level stare was to remind the card that his every action would be remembered.

Thomas's strained; overly exaggerated smile indicated to me that he didn't fully believe his actions would be rewarded anymore. After all, look where he was now. He dropped his act the moment that the judge vanished from view.

Even as we walked through the halls and eye after eye fell upon him, he did not bother to put too much effort into masking his current discontent with me, nor even try to put on a show for the gaggles of giggling girls who suddenly stopped the moment they made eye contact with him—finding nothing more interesting than a bad boy.

"Imagine if you were to help him now, and he were to become the Joker again," A Siamese cat on two legs giggled to her friends as we passed them by.

"I still am the Joker," Thomas said coldly, "it'd do them well to remember that, lest I remember them."

"Some thoughts are better left kept to one's self," Claude said with a growing grin.

"Says the King," Thomas replied, his voice growing dry as he shook his head. "You still have a title, and a marvelous one at that."

"And you still have an attitude," I informed him, feeling slightly bitter at the very idea, "and an awful one at that."

In my eyes, Thomas had won. In Thomas's eyes, we both had lost.

The reason why had become evident the longer I spent in Wonderland, and it was within the second week of my sentencing that I fully began to understand why Thomas was upset again, my realization having been spurred on by a small paperback book left out (likely by him), containing a children's story that explained the titles and realities of a place such as Wonderland—and how that impacted him.

I had scarcely considered the story for a moment before I felt even less sympathy for him and even then, as we walked through the halls and he looked all too annoyed about it all, I couldn't help but want to turn back and tell him that it was all his fault.

The fact that I managed not to say it out loud as he opened the door to my room for Claude and I was a miracle, one only bestowed upon him by the abundance of lords and ladies who flooded the halls as they struggled to make good time and hustle their way into court; desperate to find a place amongst such limited seating.

"If I was still allocated my role," Thomas remarked as I passed him by, "then you would very likely regret saying that." I offered him a similarly biting reply.

"Well, you're not the Joker now, are you, *guard*?" I asked, practically snapping at him as I walked on, doing my best to drown out the quiet snickers Claude released at my side, focusing on the idea at hand—a surprise, from Claude of all people? I really didn't trust that.

"Not yet," he said as quiet as he almost always did, and I did my best to ignore him.

Thomas would not become the Joker again, not so long as I remained in Wonderland. That much I swore. I would do everything in my power to prevent it, even when he put on an act and pretended to be my friend.

I was not fooled by the shit eating grin he wore, nor by the way that he sunk back somewhat casually against the frame of my door. I knew trouble when I saw it.

I sighed as I entered my room and wished that I could stay there for a while longer or skip the trials all together. It was ludicrous that the Duchess demanded I be presentable on a day of reckoning that wasn't even my own, and if I had to hear another maid tell me that good looks left good impressions, I would scream. What was the point of dressing

yourself up when the people in Wonderland thought candles to be hats half the time and lit them intermittently to impress each other?

More than that, what was the point of getting dressed and plumping myself up if the person I saw most regularly was my guard, who currently teetered between acting like my friend and letting me know how much he completely and utterly despised me? Even as he stood in the corner of the room, his hands clasped behind his back and his head lifted somewhat professionally, I could see the hatred simmering just beneath his skin.

I could see in his eyes that Thomas would have had my head if it was in his power to do so. Fortunately, it wasn't. Rumors protected me. I was decided to be the secret lover of the King of Hearts, and a potential bride; which I supposed wasn't far off from the truth once, though it was pretty off base now. Whatever the case, it suited me just fine and kept me from receiving a tomato to the side of my face, or any worse punishments.

It wasn't the end result Thomas had envisioned when he started all of his shenanigans.

"You should try not to be too prideful, Alice, you'll get a big head," Thomas said after a moment as he glared at my reflection in the mirror, obviously aware of the fact that I couldn't challenge any of the statements he made about Wonderland, and that it was hardly against the rules to lie to me.

In fact, lying was almost encouraged in some parts of Wonderland. That's why I stopped asking questions, because I could no longer tell what was the truth and what was a lie. There were few occasions when I felt like asking anymore.

Like when I heard the crashing downstairs and then felt the estate shake back and forth as I stared at my reflection; even though I wanted to ask what was happening, I didn't. Nor did I question when I heard the Jabberwock's cries from not all that far away, watching in the mirror as Claude flinched and Thomas gave no response. If I were to ask right then what was going on, I would surely receive a lie, since one of the key rules in Wonderland was this: *Never say something you know will upset another on a Thursday morning. Especially before noon.*

It was far too close to Friday to be a day that one ruined before it had even halfway begun, Claude had told me. That rule, like many others, was about thoughtfulness and being considerate of others. Much like the rule about always matching your socks when in colorblind company, lest you

confuse them and start a rather disheartening conversation about the color of said socks when you removed your shoes so that you could step on the *nice* carpets in someone's house.

The rules and roles of Wonderland seldom made any sense until you remembered that my father and Cornelius were not only engineers but also men of England; and men were, more often than not, seriously off.

"It is a shame that so many men run this world," I remarked under my breath as the estate gave another shake, not only referring to the world of Wonderland, but my own as well. "They come up with quite nonsensical laws," I said, shaking my head as I concluded that the Jabberwock was likely walking around the estate as the Crown Court debated whether they deemed him fit to stand trial, as when within his most monstrous form he had only seemed to walk on all fours, and Wonderland deemed standing to be such a thing that could only happen on two legs, no more. Unless you were an octopus, in which case they had to start doing the math to accommodate your various differences.

The rules of Wonderland were confusing at best.

Take the rules of titling, of which I found to be especially vexing and considered then as fingers of flames began to crawl out of my bedroom vent, slowly setting my curtains on fire as I silently waited for the commotion to dissipate and the Jabberwock to leave the halls once more.

"You won't have to suffer through this much longer," Thomas remarked, making no move to put out my curtains as he withdrew the stiff rules card from his pocket that dictated the actions of him and nearly all cards in Hearts. "He'll be sung to sleep soon enough," Thomas declared as he looked down at the card in his hand with disdain, likely remembering when not a single rules card applied to him, when he was near the level of a prince and all in the realm of Cards knelt before him.

Or nearly all.

The idea of him having any power was a strange one to me, as was the idea of him being someone of note in the realm, especially considering the fact that he did not hold a normal title nor anything of the sort. I supposed that if he had, it would have been easier to conflate the man with power.

If Thomas had a common, easy title like that of a duke, then it would have been far simpler to imagine him with some sort of control over things in Wonderland. But the problem was that in Cards, and Wonderland in general, the title of duke was a near meaningless one, one that was only

ascribed to inventors, of which there used to be just a handful, but then eventually the number of dukes came to be far too numerous for the title to mean anything—and a greater title had to be formed in result.

I sighed as I remembered the Wonderland history I'd recently begun to read and fought the urge to bash my head in against my mirror. People in Cards had an awful habit of taking some things far too seriously.

Actually, scratch that, people in Wonderland had an awful habit of taking everything too seriously.

The whole duke thing started as a joke, of course, with my father declaring a duck to be the Duke of Yorkshire after managing to replicate the similarly named puddings—Yorkshires—of which my father was so fond. But then, of course, logic came in again, and the people of Wonderland began calling anyone who invented something a duke—which sorely brought down the value of a dukedom in regard to the whole monarchy thing.

So, then a rule had to be proclaimed that the whole duke thing only applied if you were capable of inventing something and then naming it, as Cornelius and my father thought the act of naming something much harder than inventing was itself.

But then everyone had set about coming up with rubbish names, inevitably leading to such awfully ridiculous titles as the Duke of Hashberry and Archduke Francis of Salmon Balls and Yarn Thievery—a title which the duke declared himself only because he had invented two things, and that must have been quite the accomplishment.

And so, the value of a dukedom went out the window, and my father and Cornelius had to set about righting everything, which led to the title of the Joker and the Rule of Faces.

I caught myself on my bedpost as I considered the rule and what it would have meant if my father had been bold enough to declare himself worthy of a royal title, rather than just a professional one. Surely the King of Time's daughter would not be hanging on for her life as the Hearts Estate gave a lurch left and right while steam poured out of the vents.

The fact that I did not so much as flinch when screams came up through the laundry chute said a lot. The Jabberwock had been aggressive ever since his verdict was decided without a trial, but I suppose that upon learning the news, it only made sense for Jaxton to lose his head in more ways than one. This would not happen if I were a face card. None of the

decisions the Crown Court made would ever come to fruition if I were a face card.

“I suppose there will be smoke in the hallways now,” Claude remarked as he withdrew his handkerchief with a sigh, completely unaware of how it felt to be so far out of the playing card deck that life just seemed to pass you by, and moments slipped through your fingers.

If I were the Queen of Time, I would have the Caterpillar’s head. Actually, if I was the Queen of Anything, I would have had every single member of the Crown Court’s heads. They could never put me to trial. I would never have to face such fears.

“But I am Alice,” I remarked as I heard the walls give a crack beneath me. “I am only Alice,” I sighed, remembering once when someone had said my name to me with such reverence that it felt important, and that said reverence was probably a farce.

Kaeden Hart didn’t deserve to be a face card, of that, I was sure. Neither did Thomas, and neither did William half the time.

Actually, neither did William all the time, considering that he once held the power to put a stop to not only the trials, but also the chaos that had been befalling the Hearts Estate as of late. It was far too easy to wistfully think of a world in which William had accepted his fate and became the King of Cards, putting a stop to not only the trials but also the recurrent property damage at the Heart’s Estate.

I winced as the building gave a shudder, the floor beneath my feet sinking a noticeable couple of inches lower. It would hardly take the interference of a King of Cards to put an end to the wreckage of Hearts, I was convinced that a word from any old face card would do.

The Rule of Faces was this: If someone was a face card, then they were intrinsically more valuable than everyone else, and everyone should shut up and listen to them. This solved most, if not all, problems in Wonderland.

Of course, the value of a face card directly related to the value of real cards, and so the Kings and Queens of suits were treated thusly, and the Jacks were generally assumed to be their advisors and the people to whom most of the grievances for the King or Queen to resolve were addressed to.

But this was far too taxing and didn’t exactly cover the outer lands within the boundaries of the Union of Cards, and so the Joker was born.

Thomas was born, I corrected myself as his eyes traveled to Claude, and Thomas tapped the pocket watch in the front of his trousers. My father's watch.

I hated that he had it. He shouldn't have even been capable of holding said pocket watch, but he dangled it in front of me like a carrot for a horse, and every time I saw it, I fought the urge to spring blindly across the room to rip it away from him.

A part of me almost wished the thick, black fumes that filled the room would grow denser, and the noise below would continue, if only so that I could have tackled Thomas to get back my watch instead of wasting my time waiting for the Jabberwock to leave the hallway.

If Thomas still retained his title, he would have likely been the one sent to take care of the beast, just as the Joker took care of nearly everything people didn't want to do.

The Joker's role was this: Take care of everything that no one else wants to deal with, and you will technically get the formal recognition of a duke in Wonderland without exactly knowing what a duke really is, plus not owning any land.

Which, all in all, made no sense, but perhaps it made just a little at the same time?

It confused me greatly, I had to admit. But for Thomas Caard, the role of the Joker was an important one, and he desperately wished to bear the title again.

Which was why, though he was disappointed to find that his reward for successfully plotting the downfall of Chess and aiding along the inevitable proclamation of a King of Cards (due to the Crown Court pointing to the 'scheming' of Chess and declaring it necessary), Thomas accepted the role of being my guard with the understanding that if he managed not to lose or kill me, he would likely be Joker again.

Also, because he was, once again, an unbearable prat.

An unbearable prat with a pocket watch that I eyed like it was made of solid gold, one that he dangled from the front of his pocket to slightly sway from side to side, distracting me as Claude spoke again.

"You should be careful tonight, the Jabberwock sounds active," Claude said, though I didn't bother to ask him why that would affect me in the slightest, because I rarely, if ever, saw the Jabberwock. I always just heard him.

I faced a different nightmare of mine daily.

Thomas continued watching me and dangling the watch within my gaze, taunting me with the knowledge that I would never have my pocket watch again, nor see Reginald Grey alive and well. To give the watch back to me now would be nothing more than a farce. Even I was smart enough to recognize that.

“How many trials are left to attend?” I asked as the room finally ceased shaking, knowing well enough that the next trial was soon to begin and there were at least forty more to go.

“A hundred and seventy,” Claude remarked sagely from beside me, his legs dangling over the side of my bed and his body thoroughly sprawled out as he reclined backwards, sunning himself in the small beam of light that came from between the window’s curtains as if he had not just been violently shaken mere moments before. “They’ve just decided to charge the maids,” he said, somewhat remorsefully, which was funny, considering the fact that his palace cleaned itself.

“And how many more trials will there be until I am on the bench?” I asked, frowning heavily at the seemingly endless array of guilty parties and hoping that none had managed to weasel their way in front of me as I finally straightened my cardigan and acted like that was the thing that had been keeping me from leaving.

Not the terror that still lingered beneath my skin at the thought of the Jabberwock, nor the sight of a pocket watch that Thomas just as quickly shoved into his trousers once more.

“Three,” Claude said, thankfully, the number remaining unchanged and ensuring that I wouldn’t have to expect many more. Some would regard their impending trial a bit more heavily, but I...

“And Kaeden, will he be there?” I asked, not really knowing what I was hoping for, only what I had been told before. I still dreaded the Cat’s familiar silence, nevertheless.

“You know the answer,” was all he said as all the portraits in the room frowned and averted their eyes.

I did know, and I didn’t know why I bothered to ask anymore. It was almost a relief when Thomas’s voice broke the silence.

“A shame. Alice would have benefitted from such a nurturing presence,” Thomas snorted and just as sharply gestured to the door. “Out.

Now,” he commanded, jerking it and ignoring the mountain of ash that came tumbling in.

A bad sign if I ever saw one.

“Perhaps I could stay—”

“Now, now, at some point, you must face your death,” Thomas said insistently, pointing at the door while looking rather disgruntled as I grimaced.

I looked at the space around me and swallowed, then looked at the dress hanging off of me and swallowed, then looked at the books waiting on the bedside table for me and swallowed some more.

“We can’t stay in the nursery forever,” Claude said, reminding me of where I was, and the actual intention of the room that had been gifted to me.

I shook my head and tried to steady myself, suddenly finding such decorations as the vase full of dried four-leaf clovers nearest the door, and the smiling cat statue that somehow resembled Claude leaning over the doorframe a little unsettling.

It felt like the room had been decorated with the sole purpose of saving me, though I had been reassured that the nursery itself had been untouched since Kaeden was just five years old—the Harts were just an unlucky sort of family.

“Let’s go,” I said only a moment later, seizing a handful of clovers and gritting my teeth as I heard the sounds of screaming begin. “I can already hear that Roisin is here,” I said with a grimace as I noticed the particularly high-pitched tone of a few of the screams, and Claude rolled his eyes, popping out of bed to take my arm.

“You will never scream like that,” Claude said with a definite certainty, one which he had held since I had first been imprisoned.

Claude had told me numerous times that he wouldn’t see me punished, but as time ticked on, it all seemed far more likely.

“Let the games begin,” Claude said, and though Thomas gave an insistent huff, his eyes glued to the door and begging otherwise; the Cat took my arm and popped—leaving the Joker alone as usual and determined to find me before the Crown Court saw me unaccompanied.

It was Alice Keep Away; the Cat’s favorite game.

THE STAND, THE SOVEREIGN, AND ALL THE
CLAMS

Thomas's response was lost as Claude and I faded out of existence and then sprung back into it on the landing of the staircase on the fourth floor. We weren't there for a more than a second before Claude turned on his heel and peered out of the window, looking out at the masses of people on the Heart's Estate lawn with a sigh before hooking his fingers through my skirt once more with a roll of his eyes. "A spectacle," Claude murmured, and though normally he relished such chaos, one could tell he was growing weary of the mess.

For the past month, Cards had been nothing but a flurry of activity.

I was unsurprised when we popped just feet away as Claude surveyed the masses of people, then unsurprised again when we popped down a story to the ground floor where events were set to begin and the bulk of the population of Cards had begun gathering, each angling for a seat at the hearing. If Claude had made anything clear, it was that the court proceedings didn't appeal to him very much, and he'd rather be anywhere else than there; especially with the way that people gawked at him.

At his side, a goose and her family took note of him, their eyes tracing the dark black lines that marred his features as nearly everyone's did when they saw the Cat those days. Of the five goslings following the goose, four of them gasped.

Claude simmered, the corner of his mouth pulling downward but just as suddenly pulling back up the moment that one of the goslings moved to hide behind her mother's skirt. Sensing her unease, he looked back to cast her a strained smile. I don't think he faulted the goslings.

I don't think Claude faulted anyone as the two of us moved to push through the crowds, it was only natural for them to stare, after all. Even before his scars, Claude was a captivating individual.

A sigh escaped him as he regarded everyone, very evidently wishing for what had happened on the first day of the trials—a riot or something, just a good deal of commotion to make the court proceedings somewhat more interesting. Or perhaps for the courts to cancel them all together, which would have been the most fortunate of occurrences. Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

Unfortunately, such luck rarely, if ever, occurred.

I wasn't sure how much of Wonderland had come to see the Red Queen's trial, but it felt like most of it. Men and women stood closely together, wearing an assortment of hats and other finery (some of them notably from the land of Chess if their all white and red clothing were any indication). Animals and objects that typically should not have been alive stood amongst the halls, meandering around as well and speaking in excited voices as they waited in a line nearly a mile long, with the hallway in front of them continuously stretching to allow more people to fit in. A small, ginger cat turned to a broad-shouldered wooden cuckoo bird holding a copy of the Wonderland Wanderer, the paper already thoroughly yellowed and dripping with lies, as the newspaper tended to be when it was a few days old and nearly all of the 'facts' it was reporting were proven to be untruths.

The mere sight of the newspaper was why, with a sigh and a great deal of hesitation about the action, Claude popped again just as Thomas appeared on the landing, the Cat scarcely giving a snap of his fingers before we were hurtling through time and space again. Though I really, really did wish that he would have given some sort of warning or something.

The sudden jerking, spinning sensation was something I never wished to grow too accustomed with.

Still, I supposed it was better than the alternative, being escorted by Thomas in front of all of Wonderland. Or worse yet, walking— though that scarcely left you as disorientated and numb to things as popping did, really.

"Damn," said Claude, having only managed to travel a small number of feet before coming back into existence. "You're on high alert today,

aren't you, Ava?" Claude remarked, tossing a frown in one of the paintings' directions. I supposed since she was overly crowded and people from Chess were coming as well as Cards, Ava might have felt inclined to be. "You know half of these people aren't even here to see the trial, they just want the thrill of queuing up for something," Claude said, raising a brow at Ava as the estate began the futile effort of raising crowd barriers throughout the line.

Still, one of her paintings gave a shrug, and seemed to gesture to Claude to carry on with me to the front of the line, prompting him to snap his fingers just seconds before Thomas could grab onto me—therefore leaving the Joker in the dust once more as he came out of a cloud of steam from one of the side hallways.

"They must be having quite the time moving the Jabberwock today," Claude shook his head as the two of us landed further along in the line. "When they don't poke at him or antagonize him as much, he can be quite docile, but..." Claude raised a brow, "what do *I* know?" He asked rhetorically, giving yet another snap as Thomas let out an irritated call from further down the queue, evidently having been found to be a bit too insistent for the couple he popped in front of to allow him to cut in line.

There was a certain sort of madness to traveling within Cards. Or at least within the Palaces of Cards. Claude had warned me before that one simply couldn't pop into a palace, but he'd forgotten to mention the exact reason why.

Perhaps I had accepted his answer so easily that he hadn't ever thought to mention it—but I knew now as I struggled to remain standing and the already permanent spinning sensation seemed to become three times more prevalent, especially when my gut dropped every now and again as portions of the now nearly twelve foot, impossibly long Jabberwock showed through the entries to branching hallways, the creature growing longer and longer the more agitated it became.

"I suppose it's not a good day for anyone," Claude noted as the door to the courtroom came into view, and the sight of the Jabberwock's hindlegs vanished. "I suppose that's how it is. Everyone's so excited for that dim hunt you told us about to take place tomorrow that the whole of today just seems somewhat infuriating," Claude said, doing a very good job of ignoring how I averted my eyes at the proposition of the dim hunt.

Right, I still needed to do something about that, didn't I? But I could scarcely think of any way to prevent my lies from coming to light when the two of us were jerking about the way we were.

Honestly, the feeling of traveling through time and space could not get any harder—or at least I prayed it couldn't, particularly as I held on tightly to Claude's arm and struggled to remain standing, my whole stomach pretty much rebelling as I struggled to get my eyes to face the same direction and look at him.

"I hate when you do that," I informed him bluntly, changing the topic as I shook my head and looked around us. The last thing Claude needed to be made aware of was the fact that, perhaps, the dim hunt might not be real. At least, not in England. "It's crowded today," I remarked, looking around me.

It was; I didn't know how anyone could bear to stand so close to another. Just behind me, I felt the breath of a panther in a dark grey pantsuit travel down my neck, causing me to grimace at the sensation. Just about all of Wonderland had turned out for the event, and few left the courtroom as the rest struggled to file in. There was no question as to why.

"It's rare that one gets to see the trial of a queen," Claude replied, and he was right.

Manon's trial had been dealt with quietly and secretly, far out of view of the public, with the primary witness being William—who argued adamantly for her to remain at his side. This was because Manon had a very real chance at being Queen of Cards, I was told, though in my mind it was clearly something else: Manon had a very real use if she did not become Queen of Cards.

Such as becoming a tool to both recapture the Jabberwock and to punish the Red Queen, therefore leaving the whole of Chess unguarded and ripe for the taking if the Crown Court so pleased. Though they likely needn't use force, as very soon they would likely sentence Roisin to the guillotine—a punishment that it was likely she would only receive because of this: she had failed in wooing Kaeden.

"Manon's looking furious as ever today," Claude said, raising a brow as he looked through the crowds to find her. He always sought her out, and he always said the same thing, but I never knew if the words he said were really true—to me she always appeared to be as pleased as ever with her

current arrangements, having escaped her locket and been allowed to stay at William's side after her testimony.

But if it were me, and I knew myself to be used in such a way, I would have been angry. Especially since Manon's kingdom was more of an afterthought. More than that, I supposed that Claude knew her better, considering the fact that the two of them had formerly been close friends... prior to the whole Jabberwock debacle.

I stole a glimpse at her then, taking advantage of the fact that she rarely, if ever, looked Claude and I's way these days.

Her lips were pursed, her skin was pale, and her eyes were narrowed—but she held onto William tightly, and seemed as if she'd never let go. More striking than that, of course, was the fact that her back was ramrod straight and her nose was pointed in the air somewhat regally, so that she had to look down at nearly all people who spoke to her. And, of course, she was pretty. Far prettier than I could say I thought William deserved, and perhaps a bit smarter than that too. The few things that Claude said of her these days indicated to me that she was a quiet sort of brilliant, and that he may have missed her, but sometime between my coming to Wonderland and the Jabberwock's first attempt at a trial, Manon and Claude had drifted apart.

Not on her account, Claude had said, which meant that he was the one to initiate it. But I couldn't fully understand what that meant, and a part of me wondered if it was merely her disgruntlement with his attachment to me that had caused her distance, or perhaps her dissatisfaction with the way that everything had played out, and the obvious use that the Crown Court had made of her without her permission.

She didn't seem the type to like to be used by anyone, and even as Claude directed me to look away from her, I could not help but think how ridiculous the notion was that a girl as regal and commanding as her had been tricked to begin with. Surely he was right, surely she was seething.

The way that her fingers dug hard into William's flesh just before I looked away was the only proof that Claude told the truth, and I tried not to think of the look that crossed his face as Claude briefly looked up at her and was very obviously caught staring.

"Manon," he murmured, and though Claude said nothing else, there was far too much regret in his voice for one to ignore as he pointedly swerved out of her field of vision.

Claude surely hated the Crown Court's behavior as much as I did.

While the taking of Chess was a nice idea and all, the Crown Court's chief and primary concern in all of this had been forcing about the declaration of a King of Cards. Which was, for the most part, going swimmingly, considering the fact that William, upon being told that he could very well just up and seize his birthright sans a wife, tried to run. Not to mention that Fitzgerald was unsuccessful in his attempts at courting despite the fact that his list for a wife ran just about a mile long, and Claude had taken to mimicking him in said actions somewhat mockingly, declaring that he would only marry a woman who could balance a hundred plates on the tip of her little finger and yodel the whole of the nine-hour Wonderland opera known as Remember Thee—which was, by all accounts, very bad, and had never been performed in its entirety by anybody.

Means to say, all attempts at matchmaking were unsatisfactory, and so, the Duchess was sent for, Roisin was put on trial, and I was watched very closely—because surely, I had to be the reason for it all.

“Manon must be concerned,” I murmured, keeping my head down and my lips sealed as I was meant to. I had finally learned that there was a consequence to every one of my actions. “Even if they don't get along, it's not easy to lose a sibling,” I said, my lips pressed tightly together as I thought of Mary, who was probably beside herself with how long I had been gone without explanation.

If time worked in Wonderland just as it did in my world, and the dates that I marked upon scraps of paper were correct, it would have been almost six months since I'd disappeared, I estimated.

“If it's any consolation, Roisin always wanted to die in an interesting way,” Claude said, obviously catching my distaste. Beside him, a pig seemed to nod along, agreeing with his statement. “If anything, this trial is one step closer to doing so. People will be talking about this for months —”

“—She's a child,” I remarked, shooting Claude a scowl as I stood unable to forget the wideness of her eyes and the light set of her brow.

“Nonsense, she's simply extraordinarily young,” Claude claimed, just as quickly looking away from me, as if that would do anything to hide the heaviness creeping over his features. “This is what she would want,” he repeated, though it was obvious that he did not believe it. “This way, she'll

never be forgotten.” I didn’t think anyone believed that, not when they had heard her howling and screaming well into the night for the past month.

I winced at the mere memory and heard Claude swallow beside me, obviously recounting the same thing, or likely something close to it. No one could forget it once they heard her scream, nor the furious way that she shook the bars, calling for Bram at the top of her lungs and ignoring the way that he never responded. The screams lasted for three long hours before the Hearts Estate had the sensibility to muffle them, reinforcing walls and rearranging furnishings, but the sound had lasted long enough. I could never forget it.

Nor could I forget the broken look of the Rook, Bram’s, eyes as he went to trial and pleaded guilty on all charges, attempting to make a plea deal for her life. *But would you equate the life of a measly little rook to that of a queen?* The Caterpillar had argued, *everyone knows that only a pawn can be traded for a queen*, he said, and the Courts agreed, like a pawn was anything near a queen in value.

I still remembered how the red had drained from Bram’s face as they thanked the Rook for admitting guilt anyway and told him that he should be sure to schedule his time at the gallows with Oliver Stamma, who was now in the Crown Court’s favor.

Stamma had penciled the execution in for June 31st, which seemed far too close in my mind. But I supposed Oliver was not one for mercy.

“It’s not that I support it,” Claude said quietly beside me, his fingers locking around mine as he reminded me where we were and of the large courtroom sitting in front of us. “It’s that I don’t want to say the wrong thing and ensure that whatever punishment they have in store for you is worsened by my defiance.”

Ah.

Claude had been very, very concerned about that. The mere mention of my trial was enough to make the smile slip from his face.

My fingers tightened around his as I looked away. Just the thought alone sent my stomach reeling, so I chose to pay attention to the room instead—because in Wonderland, court was as much theater as it was litigation.

And to be honest, I would have rather paid attention to theater than reality. Especially when I knew that not far from those walls, the Jabberwock was thrashing and screaming menacingly, his calls silenced by

the magic heavily coating the court space with the intention of focusing things.

At least when the jury was there and all of Wonderland was watching, I could pretend things were somewhat civil under the rule of the Crown Court, and that it would not soon be me standing as the defendant.

“They decorated beautifully today,” I said lightly as people struggled to get to their seats around us, regarding Claude and I with no small degree of dismay as the two of us opted to stand awkwardly in front of it all, not having to rush in order to keep our seats largely because they were already reserved.

“Yes,” Claude said almost inaudibly. “The Crown Court has really gone out of their way today,” he murmured with a smile, but there was a strain of bitterness under his tone. It was best to speak kindly when acknowledging them, at least until a new King of Cards finally stepped up to be crowned.

But despite it all, the courtroom was beautiful, I hated to admit.

With every single trial, the third largest room in the Heart’s estate was redecorated, the heavy red drapery changed to suit whoever was currently on trial, and just about all of the other decorations morphing as well. The room rearranged itself to suit different verdicts, pieces of evidence, and witnesses—and to thereby reflect the current opinion of the four courts: Crown, Canidae, Chiropteran, and Corvidaen. With just a glimpse, you could tell which way they were leaning with the verdict... which was currently not very favorable, considering the fact that a large portrait of a man with an axe sat just beyond the heads of the Crown Court, and the Crows of the Corvidaen court had already set about making miniature guillotines, which was quite vexing. They were supposed to be somewhat tight-lipped when it came to predetermined case rulings. At least at the last one I was at; they were a little less eager.

Of course, no two trials looked the same, I admitted to myself as the two of us finally neared the open doors to the courtroom, and despite the fact that proceedings in Wonderland seemed to carry on almost endlessly, no two days looked alike either.

Take a few days prior, for starters.

Roisin had appeared once as a witness that day, and the courtroom had, of course, changed to suit her. That day, all the banners had turned white, and every piece of decoration was white as well. At first it seemed almost

as if the room was declaring Roisin's innocence and reliability, but then it turned out to be a rather clever move by the Crown court, who not only played the part of judges in the trials but also the prosecution. I shivered at the memory, feeling almost cold as my eyes drifted over to the judges sitting at their high perches in front of the audience, their noses pointed into the air and their skin near glistening.

It almost seemed like the more other people faltered, the more they thrived.

You see, the moment that Roisin had entered that room and saw all the white, she lost her temper. This proved to the jury, which was the only part of the trials that the Crown Court was not involved in, that Roisin was, for the most part, insane. Which unfortunately was not a very good look in Wonderland—and a little detail of Roisin's personality that she hardly needed help coaxing out, especially when, all things considered, Roisin was just a little mad.

And growing madder by the day. I could not imagine her response when, upon further regard, I realized that the man in the painting above the Crown Court was her widely despised uncle, the Black King, who it was said would set about overthrowing Chess and keeping it under his rule... if only someone knew where he was.

Just the sight of him would infuriate Roisin, and Claude and I hardly needed to watch her to know that.

Instead, he shook his head and pulled at my hand as the two, large courtroom doors behind us started to close. Claude began to tug me into the stands, doing his best to ignore the loud echo of the way that Roisin complained—which hardly needed to be amplified, but unfortunately was by the way that the room was decorated that day.

The long banners had been replaced with red painted walls, which curved ever so slightly towards the top and formed a perfect little shell for amplifying Roisin's many grievances. The reason why was, of course, obvious.

"I don't know why she whines," an eagle said ahead of us, rolling her eyes at the young queen. "The Crown Court has been so kind as to provide her with representation. It's a courtesy that they've seldom extended to others," the Eagle said, sounding quite logical indeed, except if you knew the truth of the matter.

Which was that Roisin's legal team was currently working against her.

I bit my tongue so as not to speak as we moved near the Eagle, an intrusive thought in the back of my mind beckoning me to push the Eagle over and be done with her, or at least to inform her otherwise—that she was, in fact, wrong, and that the legal representation the Crown Court had offered dear Roisin was far worse than none.

I suppose that was the problem in receiving representation from the Crown Court against the Crown Court.

I frowned at the Eagle and did my best to look past her, straining my eyes to see Roisin and her red gown, as well as her lawyer, the Walrus.

“Kaeden and I will be sure that the Walrus does not represent you,” Claude hissed as he continued to pull me about, undoubtedly knowing where I was looking and sensing the sickening sensation ruminating in my stomach. “You will have a fair trial, I promise you,” he said, “or I’ll find a way to keep you from even having to stand trial,” Claude swore, “as I, admittedly, quite like the idea of you not rotting in a jail cell.”

I currently liked not rotting in a cell as well, a thing that I would most certainly be doing if a trial were to take place and I were to be the one being tried.

Largely because of the Walrus, whose massive, doughy bald head I could see out of the corner of my eyes, its three long strands of black hair hardly managing to hide the misshapen lump that comprised the Walrus’s skull.

I highly doubted that there were any thoughts in the Walrus’s head to begin with other than worrying over the care and maintenance of those three strands.

It was rather unfortunate that Roisin had been awarded the Walrus, but I suppose no less unfortunate than had she been handed her opposition’s lawyer, who was in fact a carpenter, and therefore far more ill-equipped for the job than the briefcase carrying, mustachioed Walrus. Largely because the Walrus at least looked official, carrying around the proper props and holding his head up just a little higher, while the Carpenter just carried his tools and set to whittling away the edge of the table in front of him.

All things considered however, Roisin must not have felt all that well off when the Walrus opened his large briefcase and clams spilled out. He scurried to pick them up beside her, but wasn’t quick enough to grab them

all before a handful of clams began clapping their shells and tried to scurry off.

The Walrus had already gotten both the Jabberwock and seventeen guards convicted... and he had only gone to court sixteen times thus far. One of his clients hadn't even been in the trial nor assigned to be on duty when the Jabberwock attacked—he was just that bad. Never before had I heard an argument begin with, *'now if we assumed that he did it, which I'm not saying he did or did not—'*

The Walrus's skills were terribly ineffective, and the only talent he seemed to exhibit was for objecting, which he did loudly and often. Sometimes he even did it for no reason at all.

"It is unfortunate that in Wonderland, anyone can be a lawyer," I remarked, and Claude nodded sagely in response, obviously having far more than agreed with my judgement.

"Again, that will not be you," Claude promised, his hand tightening around mine as if he were scared to let go or frightened to let his person drift too far from mine. God knew what would happen to me if I was spotted without a king or guard; the Crown Court would take any chance it could to accuse me of another crime. "Damn, she's here," Claude remarked briskly, and I could feel him bristle as we approached the small half door that separated the common folk from the honored guests. "And I was thinking that setting all of her clocks back would work this time," Claude grimaced, his tail dropping as he stared ahead.

The Duchess, if I had to guess.

I averted my eyes, or tried to which was difficult to manage when my options were either her, Thomas standing beside her with a set of knowing hazel eyes, Kaeden and yet another hopeful bride, or the Duchess's guards. I tried to focus on Manon in the background instead, but found myself confronted with the image of another Card Guard the moment that the abundance of powder the Duchess patted upon her nose dissipated.

There were so many guards.

And not a single one of them looked happy to see me, or to be there at all. In fact, they all looked at me in a rather accusatory fashion, as if I had committed yet another crime in going off with Claude, or as if so much as peeking behind them to see the Suit Kings was a sort of crime. One of them shifted his heavy body the moment I so much as tried to look past to see Kaeden and William—and so in the end, I figured, why bother?

Which led to me looking back at the Duchess mere seconds later, only to find that she was as unfortunate to gaze upon as ever.

She stood menacingly near the door with Thomas not that far from her side, tapping her foot and looking quite gruesome as layer after layer of powder sat heavily on her face—marking the overuse of her compact as she sat through trial after trial.

“Alice,” she said, not so much as bothering to acknowledge Claude, because in her mind Claude could do no wrong, and there was nothing anyone could say that would convince her otherwise. “Care to explain why you have lost your guard for the fifth day in a row?” She asked, and I stared down warily as I was caught in her gaze. “If you’re really not going to take things seriously, then I don’t see why we should have a trial at all —” she said, and continued to speak loudly through proceedings as she sat me down less than eagerly by her side. “Especially when you are obviously guilty,” she muttered under her breath, barely glancing over at me before turning back to the trial.

The Duchess made no effort to hide the fact that she thought of the trials as little more than sport, and that she cared little what happened to Roisin or me. Even then she looked past the tiny figure of Roisin who sat minimized in large, hand me down prison garb, up to the Caterpillar, who it turned out the Duchess was quite fond of. All the while she was talking, of course, and moving her hand and blocking the view. Every so often she looked over at Claude and Kaeden, then to her most treasured nephew William—and then back to me. But only for a second, and only to reprimand me.

“...And I don’t see why, despite all the kindness and generosity I have shown you, you cannot be bothered to sit up straight, or smile pleasantly when I am speaking to you...” She carried on as I settled in my seat and tried to pay attention to the trial, her words and the prosecutors blending together as I watched Roisin wearily, all too aware that every so often I would be caught in her gaze, her eyes lingering on mine as if to say, ‘look! See what you’ve done to me!’ and ignoring me as my hopeless gaze desperately tried to assure her otherwise. I had not so much as spoken to her since the trials began, knowing that I likely wouldn’t be allowed, and more than that... “Smile as a young lady should! You should be sure to present yourself properly, lest a young man look your way and think not to look in such an unfortunate direction ever again,” The Duchess said,

smacking my leg, and I plastered my widest, most insincere smile onto my face in response.

The Duchess would never let me so much as dream of speaking to the Red Queen. Not when she was currently the Duchess's greatest failure, a match made in mayhem that the Duchess herself had fought so hard to forge.

"But dear Duchess, whatever is the point?" I remarked innocently, "for any man who looks in my direction will glance over and see your far more *captivating* features," I said, and how I managed to keep to myself the very long list of reasons why her features were so captivating in nature, I did not know.

"Yes, well it is an unfortunate thing to be so ugly and seated near one so beautiful," The Duchess said with a shake of her head, "but you simply must try to do better and smile. I should hate any potential suitors to see you standing at your trial and think you to be mad about any of it, it would be simply off-putting," she remarked, as if one should be concerned about being considered off putting when their head was on the line. "Heavens knows your face alone will disturb them," she said sadly, as if it were a fact that she'd had to resign herself to accepting.

I suppose she had to accept a lot when it came to me, seeing as how she was stuck with me for the next few weeks at the behest of her darling nephew Claude, who claimed her to be quite influential and worth a shot. Though how anyone could be influenced to do anything other than moisturize and be a little kinder after being around the Duchess, I did not know.

She seemed to think the world revolved around her, however, which in Wonderland often meant that it did, because in Wonderland just thinking something was more often than not enough to will it into existence.

No matter how awful and unlikeable you were.

"...And be lively tonight," the Duchess loudly continued as I tried and failed once again to focus on the trial, "we've been invited by the Crown Court once again, and I won't be made a laughingstock by you causing a scene," she said as I watched Roisin endure through her trial.

For a moment, I almost thought she glanced up at me. For a second, I almost thought her eyes met mine. For a single breath, I almost thought she glared straight through me. But that was unlikely, as she had her own

concerns, and all of them likely resided in the list that the court had begun to prattle off.

A list of her crimes, one that grew day by day and made the likelihood of her death almost a certainty.

“An interesting night...” the Duchess carried on, “there will be entertainment for once, so there’s no need for you to act a fool...”

I was scarcely paying attention to her as my attention floated around the courtroom, landing on Manon and the way that she sat so rigidly that it almost pained me. I wondered if she had somehow gotten paler or if I had imagined the way that she gripped William’s hand. Surely I had not imagined the way that he watched her out of the corner of his eyes.

I most certainly did not imagine the low murmur of the Jabberwock’s roar hidden somewhere far out of sight. Nor the way that the Caterpillar’s lips curled at the sound, and the slightest, smoke-filled laugh escaped him.

Despite myself, I dreaded the trials concluding anytime soon, lest I found out what exactly the Crown Court and the Unified Kingdom of Cards had up their sleeves.

THE TERRIBLE, AWFULLY BAD,
HORRENDOUSLY UNPLEASANT,
FRIGHTFULLY ATROCIOUS, AND OVERALL
UNLIKEABLE WOMAN AND THE SEARCH FOR
NORMAL SUITORS

The trial ended abruptly in only two hours, the Crown Court having gotten hardly halfway through Roisin's long list of supposed crimes, of which arson and other various things I was certain Roisin had not done were a part. The Walrus had hardly introduced himself, and Roisin had not so much as opened her mouth, instead choosing to sit in her seat and draw aggressively on the pad of paper provided to her.

I couldn't help but wonder if that was how my trial would go, or if mine would be swifter and more decisive, with hardly any arguments made at all before they sent me to the gallows. I doubted that I was the only person thinking such a thing, judging by the strained look on Claude's face, the pleased smile on Thomas's features, and the way that Kaeden stared emptily towards the witness stand, waiting for someone to testify as the girl beside him watched the whole show eagerly.

But perhaps that was self-centered of me. I had recently been told that being self-centered was one of my faults, the Duchess had transcribed a list of issues for me that she insisted I worked on.

Being impatient was another one, which I found ironic.

"Ah, wonderful, now we're done with that boring lot," the Duchess drawled before court was fully adjourned. "We should move if we are to scope out your options at the party and find you a proper suitor," she said, ignoring the fact that I had already dismissed her proposition of marrying me off five times in the past week, and that I only vaguely registered the fact that a party held by the Crown Court was set to begin.

To be honest, I took the bulk of what she said and threw it away most days, as it more often than not was just plain aggressive. But she thought I

held onto her every word, that I found her riveting, and that I would follow her to the ends of the earth.

“Someone incapable of seeing, hearing, or thinking too much about what you are like,” the Duchess repeated over and over again as the gavel finally hit the block. Those three traits were supposedly the ideal mixture for a man to want to marry me.

And I should have wanted a man to marry me because if my name changed, then I surely couldn’t be charged with anything, because it was Alice Grey who committed those crimes and not Alice... Something or other. Wonderland logic.

The Duchess scarcely waited for the trial to formally end for the day, nor for the look of distress to leave my features. She was just as lively and animated as she’d ever been, almost immediately jumping to her feet and beginning to scurry about, her short legs doing nothing to slow her down as she moved at the speed of sound and left me to collect my bearings and hurry on after her, barely catching a glimpse of the Red Queen leaving the bench before I had to break into a verifiable sprint.

Which I most certainly did, considering the fact that if I did not, I would most definitely find myself in a whole world of trouble.

I held my breath and hauled up my skirts as I barreled on past Fitzgerald and William, praying that I would not break into a sweat. God knew the last time that I did, the Duchess practically slammed her hankie into the side of my face.

“How can someone so short move so fast?” I cursed, already knowing the answer laid in the way people dove out of her path—which was wise of them, really.

I had learned something very important about the Duchess lately: the fact that she did not have a single nurturing bone in her body, and if she did, she might have accidentally swallowed it along with one of the many small beasts she almost always insisted she dine on—a Cornish hen, perhaps. The only moments when she showed any hint of kindness were towards Eustace, or Claude, or occasionally now—

“Kaeden looks lovely with that little Arabella Miller girl, now, doesn’t he?” The Duchess said the second I managed to catch up, somehow ignoring the struggle in my breathing and the line of people I’d left upset behind me as she turned to look over at me with a single raised brow, almost congratulating herself. “Of course, he isn’t overly fond yet, but I

had to find someone to take the little brat,” the Duchess admitted, a smile playing upon her cracked lips as a single flake of red lipstick marred her yellowed teeth. “She won’t marry him though,” she said, as if anyone would turn down a king, “not with genes like his,” she nodded in agreement with herself. “It’s a shame his mother isn’t locked up,” she said, nodding towards her youngest nephew. “It might have helped his chances.”

I silently cursed under my breath as my eyes betrayed me and drifted back to him, ever eager to see his face, and caught on the slightest hint of a smile at the corner of his mouth. Arabella had said something funny; I was sure. I dug my nails into my palm and turned away.

She’d be gone by tomorrow, I knew. They were always gone by the very next day.

Unlike my suitors, unfortunately. But I supposed that for all the Duchess didn’t think I was a suitable bride for anyone, she didn’t want to disappoint Claude. Therefore, she was downright desperate to sell me off to the highest bidder.

I missed my mother, who at least had some decorum, and who was most definitely more pleasant to look at.

“I bought you a gift,” the Duchess said, stealing away my attention once more with her sugar sweet, yet slightly acidic voice. Hardly a second later, a ribboned, pink monstrosity hit me straight in my chest, causing me to wince. “You’ll need it.”

“Ouch—”

“A dancing book,” the Duchess said non-conversationally as I grimaced down at the flowery thing that had struck me, noting the fabric cover and the large, golden embroidered letters of my name. “Nineteen lines, one for each dance they’ll be playing tonight, and a little column for a check mark after you’ve had them write their names,” she said, “so that you can be sure that you have actually remembered to dance with them.” The Duchess looked proud of that, raising her nose up as I frowned down at the heart-covered monstrosity, noting a long, lacey ribbon poking out from the side. “You’re to wear it and report back to me at the end of the night so that I may see your choices and rule out the ones that would have no interest in you,” she said, ignoring the fact that the thing within my hands... well, it just wasn’t all that wearable, not with its glittering fabric and excessive ribbons. Nor with the fact that it was nearly the size of a college ruled notebook.

I got the idea, but... to have that tied around my wrist?

"I figured a book was best," the Duchess further elaborated beside me, speaking in a high pitched, holier than thou tone of voice—really the only tone of voice that she ever used with me. "We are in shockingly desperate times," she stated, "and as yet, I don't foresee you becoming a bride before your trial is to begin—" she glanced over at me in a moment of disgust, looking me up and down. "Though Claude is apt to stall," she proclaimed, raising an eyebrow and making it sound as if, all things considered, he might be stalling for a very, very long time. "He really should look into paying someone to marry you, it might be easier," she murmured as we walked past the Card Guards, Claude having long since vanished out of the corner of my eyes. "Perhaps a lower ranking Card would take you," she mumbled, eyeing a pock marked two who stood with an absurdly crooked posture.

"I could only be so lucky," I remarked, remembering the last card I had the misfortune of dealing with, the one that stood behind me and bit back a laugh. It was only under threat of death that I did not try to tackle him to the ground most days, the idea of beating him senseless was still far too attractive to me. But of course, I highly doubted that fighting Thomas would do much to convince others of my innocence. If anything, it would just scare away more suitors, who were the only help I could hope for these days.

Alice Grey was being tried, after all. Not Alice Whatshername, doting wife of sir Whoeveragreestoit. To do anything to scare off a potential Whoeveragreestoit would be stupid.

A shame, I thought as we entered the main hallway and I peered through the other archways, looking for signs of the Jabberwock—only to come up empty handed.

I had not done a very good job of being appealing to suitors. Nor had I thought that I needed to do a good job initially, as Claude had insisted that there were other ways to get out of trials in Wonderland and that, though he had initially enlisted the help of his aunt, her help would likely not be needed. I wouldn't stand trial, he had assured, there would be ways to protect me other than changing my name.

And yet, here we were, with time dwindling away and the consequences of my actions looking me right in the face. There was only

one way to change one's name in Wonderland, and unfortunately, it did not seem that many were crawling over each other to marry a criminal.

Maybe the Jabberwock *should* have eaten me all those months ago. It would have saved me a great deal of trouble, after all.

"You are lucky that I owe a great many debts to your father, Alice," the Duchess said as we walked down the hallway, as if she were the height of charity. "I should very much like to see an unpleasant girl like you hanged," she remarked as I investigated another hallway, swallowing once I found it empty.

The Jabberwock was nowhere in sight.

The realization was sobering, but if the Duchess cared about Jaxton and the threat he posed, she did a good job of hiding it. Her small, hard hand made contact with my thigh once more after only a second. "Well, aren't you going to thank me?" She demanded, as if that should have been my first instinct at the moment, rather than wondering about the giant fire breathing monster that had inhabited the halls just minutes before.

That was another lovely thing I'd learned about the Duchess, whenever she did anything kind, no matter how awful she'd been to you before, you were to act as if she were an angel that had descended from the heavens amongst choruses of angels only to bestow the gift of her presence upon you. Any less and she would be greatly displeased with you. Any less and she would scowl. And heaven knew she only looked worse when she scowled.

Still, she had her moments of genuine kindness... or close to it. She didn't treat me half as roughly as she did the guards, which should have been good enough for me. More than that, she hadn't tried to formally kill me yet, so, that was something.

"The book is empty," I remarked, tearing my attention away from the halls and flicking open the front cover only to find row after row empty. That was a kindness, because the few times before I had been deemed worthy enough to attend the men's smoking room with her, the dance cards she'd handed me had been full... and even then, she had gone about handing them out to gather more names to go upon the list, on the off chance that my dreadful personality had scared a few of them away.

"I hadn't the time to fill it today," she stated, as if such a thought were a bother to her despite her having done the act numerous times before. "I've been invited to go on the dim hunt tomorrow," she said as if this

were a great honor, even though she didn't know what a dim was, nor that I had made it up as a distraction to delay my trial.

I needed as much time as I could get, considering the fact that my death seemed somewhat imminent.

I also needed as much distance as I could get as well, and I had high hopes that sucking up to the Duchess would somehow result in me returning to my Clocktower abode. Especially when I could see members of the Canidae Court pass me by out of the corner of my eyes, watching me as all the judges did day after day, not caring that I was the whole reason they were there.

The members of court had been luxuriating during their stay in the Land of Hearts, of course, as it had been a great while since they had been allowed to take up residence in a palace rather than their humble abodes, and every day they made new demands. They stomped about looking for bigger parties and grander entertainments, better rooms and larger audiences—and when they weren't doing that, they watched me, waiting for the slightest slip up.

"They hate it when you stare at them," Thomas reminded me as he came up on my side, grasping my skirt and directing my attention away as the dogs set to putting on their top hats and smoking jackets, scarcely allowing a second to pass between work and play.

"And yet everyone is allowed to watch me," I said, crinkling my nose.

"Because you are far too interesting to look away from," a voice remarked in my ear.

A pair of lips against my cheek jerked me back to reality at the same time that a large, scarred hand wrapped around mine, Claude somehow managing to appear in my peripheral vision—though how he could so easily pop about still remained unexplained to me. A smile tugged on the corner of his mouth as he pulled away from me, reminding me of how close we were to our final destination—and also inspiring a question in the back of my mind as to where he had gone just moments before.

"Are you coming to the dim hunt?" Claude said a mere second later, having evidently overheard his aunt's statement.

Of course, I scarcely opened my mouth before she spoke for me.

"Surely not. The hunt is a *reward*," she said, rolling her eyes. "Might I remind you that Alice is still a most dangerous prisoner," the Duchess

proclaimed as we moved towards the doors of the smoking room, as if that would do much to help me with the acquisition of suitors.

It had its intended effect, obviously, and caused more than a few men to step away from the door to the room to eye me warily, as if I would attack them at any second. Lovely.

“Besides, everyone knows the dim hunt is only for the best of the best,” the Duchess said pompously, shaking her head as she pointed her short, snout-like nose up in the air. “And to be quite plain, dear, Alice is not the best of the best,” she proclaimed, her cracked lips shaping into a frown, as if the idea itself was insulting. “It will be you, I, Manon, and my wonderful, joyous little William—” she began, ignoring the fact that he was hardly little or joyous. “Besides, she’ll scare the dims,” she said, and it was like she was goading me to respond. Really, I couldn’t help it.

“There are no dims in Wonderland, because they’re not real,” I murmured, just quiet enough that she could not hear me as she pushed the doors open and descended upon the smoking room. “And even if there were, I doubt they’d hang around very much longer after seeing you—” I began, but did not finish as a familiar sound, a feral scream, hit the air once more when the Duchess pushed the door open, causing my limbs to freeze as they almost always did.

I could feel Thomas’s hand upon me as he gave the slightest shove, forcing me closer to it, the thing that haunted me in my dreams.

The Jabberwock.

THE GLORIOUS CENTERPIECE AND THE GREGARIOUS COURTS

It was different seeing the face of the monster rather than its body.

My eyes met its as they always did, its yellowed gaze turning my bones to lead as a stream of thick, black smoke rolled from its large, jagged nostrils. Its teeth, which seemed endless and far too sharp for any person to understand, gleamed, and its long, oily black body snaked closer—ever closer—as its eyes remained on me, capturing me in its gaze and leaving me ever cold and ever stiff, ever shocked and ever miserable. Especially as its long, clawed fingers rose to grip the bars, squeezing the iron between them with a sort of unspoken threat until—

“—A drink,” Claude said, stepping in front of me and blocking the scene as beside him the Duchess let out her merry little laugh, entertained by the Jabberwock’s misery. Never mind that she had no idea what it meant to face the Jabberwock, or to know Jaxton Walker. “I need a drink,” Claude repeated instead of facing her, carefully keeping his back turned to the spectacle until the screams had ceased and the punishment had been completed.

Even then, when a horrifying gurgle hit the air as Jaxton fell away from the iron bars, a heavy burn marring his arms; Claude did his best to stand in front of the man, to hide from me the truth of the fate of the Jabberwock...

He had become nothing more than a centerpiece for now. Something about that felt insulting to me.

“Alice, would you—”

“No,” I said, interrupting the Cat’s question as the Duchess clapped in delight beside him, a low cackle escaping her at the sight of the familiar

routine. The one in which Jaxton reacted to nearly every guest's entrance and the Crown Court branded him in return. She loved that sort of thing, even if it left me feeling dizzy and lightheaded at the very sight; she was much better suited for life at court than I was. "I don't think I should like a drink—" I said, but even then, Thomas came to my side, holding in his hand a narrow champagne flute filled with a blue liquid.

Calm, it said. I didn't trust it one bit. Not when it came from him, but I downed it anyway, disappointed when it didn't fully work.

"You should remember to travel around the room and dance," the Duchess said, "after we see the Caterpillar, of course," she remarked, and I felt my hair stand on end.

"The Caterpillar," I repeated, gripping the champagne glass within my hand and giving the slightest sway, my eyes still lingering where I knew the Jabberwock rested at the other side of the room.

"Yes, the Caterpillar," The Duchess said in irritation, undoubtedly rolling her eyes as she seized my arm and pulled me along. "He requested your attentions? Surely you must have heard me, I've been told that I have a knack for commanding the room—dominating it, really," she said.

"The Caterpillar..." I repeated, my voice trailing off as my stomach turned. Was I more afraid of him, or the Jabberwock, I wondered. Though I supposed wondering did little to help my situation, especially once the Duchess had caught hold of me and dragged me across the room.

"Erwic!" She said in delight, very obviously wanting to be done with the situation as soon as possible, if only so she could enjoy her night. "Look, I brought Alice!" She proclaimed as I hung limply at her side, the Jabberwock finally taken out of my field of vision and replaced with an equally horrifying sight...

I never liked to look at the Caterpillar.

Not with his many legs and his human face. Not with the long cigarette holder held between his fingers, or the two girls, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, glued constantly to his side. But the flowers must have, considering that there were about a dozen of the flower girls lingering at his side, talking animatedly upon a large, rounded conversation sofa that his legs dominated the bulk of, and acting as if he were a gift from the heavens themselves.

Not that he paid them any mind, but...

“Duchess,” he said, pleased, and that pleasure remained as he said my name, dragging out the vowels and causing me to flinch in the process. “Alice,” Erwic said, long and languid, and I wished that I were somewhere else, preferably in another postcode. “Such a long time since we last encountered each other,” he said, “some would say it appears rather purposeful.”

Because it was. “Some would be mistaken,” I lied, because lying was something that I, Alice, was now good at, and it was hardly a crime in Wonderland. Not when some people lied more than they breathed. “Pleased to see you, Erwic,” I proclaimed, and put on my best plastic smile, wishing to never have to speak to him again.

The Caterpillar was a part of the Crown Court, I had to remind myself. The Crown Court had been in league with Thomas, at least once. And Thomas was no good. Those were facts it did me best not to forget. At least not for now, not until my trial began and I knew exactly what I was up against.

“Full dance card again?” Erwic asked in his typical way of speaking, and I offered only a nod in response. “Perhaps cut a few short to save me one,” he said, as if that were the most natural, normal thing in the world for him to say.

As if he wasn’t practically holding the axe over my neck himself.

“Of course,” I said quickly, eager to end what would likely be my shortest conversation with the Caterpillar as the dance book in question hung uselessly from my wrist.

From the moment he said it, I had no intentions of adding his name.

I had no intentions of adding anyone’s name, nor humoring the notion of doing so when he spoke once more.

“You’ve grown beautifully,” he said, “it is a shame that your father is not here to see... but I suppose it would be a shame as well if he were to know what you’ve done,” Erwic continued. “Perhaps you should make more of an effort to keep your nose clean, and stay true to the Grey family name,” the Caterpillar said with a puff of his cigar, and I knew then something very important; I was going to leave.

Not the estate, as I was cursed to constantly reappear within random corners of the Heart’s Estate grounds the moment I crossed the property line; but I could leave the party at the very least. Perhaps I would go to the

maze, where I could hide until the next day— or maybe I would go somewhere else, somewhere where my guard could not find me.

I desperately wanted to be anywhere but there.

“They’re a suitable pair,” the Caterpillar began, suddenly directing his attention elsewhere, perhaps to Arabella, or Manon, or some other unfortunate soul. “Far better than I assumed they would be,” he murmured, and the Duchess immediately jumped into action.

“Their children’s ears will be too big,” she said, moving beside him as if I weren’t there, as if I had never been there. “And her nose is much too big, much like Alice’s,” she said, only momentarily drawing attention to my features before turning back, practically leaving me to myself.

It was probably a bad sign, being dismissed in such a way, but I waited for a single second.

Maybe even less than that.

It was easy, they didn’t even glimpse my way. I took it as dismissal enough, a cue to walk away and not turn back even if they did call my name.

Actually, if they called my name, I likely would have moved quicker, if only to attempt to get away faster. I could get pretty far from them, but my guard...?

I had scarcely reintegrated myself into the crowds before he was there again, at my side once more with his arm catching me around my middle.

Thomas was inescapable. Especially when I most needed him to go away. I had scarcely gotten more than fifteen feet from the Caterpillar before he appeared out of the blue again, and he didn’t even pay attention to my scowling as he pulled me to his side, falling into step beside me way too easily.

I hated to admit it, but he was remarkably good at his job.

“You’re not getting too far away from me,” he said, still gripping my waist.

“Hands to yourself,” I hissed, stalking as I always did, as far away from him as possible. Unfortunately, he had a nasty little habit of following me.

And of reminding me of my situation, of course. “We’re not enemies today,” Thomas said in my ear, like that was any sort of reassurance.

“Yes, well, I’d hardly call you my friend,” I said dryly as I eyed not only the exits, but also the crowd, taking inventory of what I needed to

account for if I were to escape.

Annoying guard? Check. That left four other obstacles.

“Cold as always,” Thomas said, because who would he be if he did not remind me of how I annoyed him those days. “You forget that I am your best bet,” he said, and I ignored the prickling urge to shoot an awful look back at him, instead busying myself with counting kings. “You know, I could easily marry you, Alice, and that would solve all of our problems—” Thomas began as my eyes drifted past him, spotting Claude chatting up a short blonde by the refreshment table.

One.

“You could be free, and I could regain my title,” Thomas continued as my eyes skirted around the corners of the room, catching Fitz sitting amongst the Caterpillar and his brood, smoking a long, lavish cigarette. “Mutual benefit, if you will,” Thomas elaborated, as if I cared to do anything to benefit him.

I’d bite off my own arm to spite him.

Two. I noted and began to look again, my eyes traveling over the edges of the room, navigating a layout that I was beginning to get far too comfortable with as Thomas continued to speak.

“It’s not as if there’s nothing there,” Thomas said as my eyes moved across heavy silk curtains and golden wallpaper, past the large cage that sat in the center of the room and the glittering fountains at the sides. I squinted as I struggled to see through the thick swirling clouds of smoke that mingled with the air, doing my best to spot William amongst the crowd.

He always went to parties now, of course, now that Manon was out of the locket and by his side, ever pale and shaky and no longer intent on being his bride.

I spotted her first, of course, standing stiffly beside him, her long blond hair pulled upwards into a tight bun and her elegant features looking strained as her eyes veered to the left—looking, as she always did, at the sight not that far from her. Jaxton Walker in a cage, a man she proclaimed to love once, a man who looked to the tall figure at her side with disdain as he quivered in rags.

William. That made *three*.

“I need to catch my breath, not argue with you,” I murmured as I continued to push through the crowd with Thomas at my side, knowing all

too well what a trip to the smoking room meant and that it would go as it always did—

“I need to have a cigar,” Thomas responded with a squint as if he had just realized the fact, never happy to walk outside with me and watch me fall apart again, but always glad to get a smoke in. “But I suppose I can’t expect you to let me light up right beside you.”

It was what I was counting on, really, because that was how things always went. Thomas was never content to sit back and watch me cry, and I?

Well, I almost never actually cried, did I?

“Five minutes,” I said heavily, trying to make it sound like a great sacrifice when god knew, five minutes was all it took. A five-minute smoke would turn into hours with him, and for all he wasn’t supposed to? He looked at me just as he always did.

“Five minutes,” he said, walking in front of me and blocking the view as he near always did, causing me to look back, see Arabella, and just assume. “The party’s barely started anyway,” Thomas remarked as he continued to block the view, and I tried not to dwell on what he meant by that.

Four. It had to be four. Kaeden wouldn’t leave his date unattended. He was too well mannered.

“Okay,” I said to Thomas as I nearly always did, the metal handle to the glazed glass door leading outside in my hand and my fingers already itching to turn it as he nodded silently to himself, looking all too pleased.

He always looked far too pleased. He always smiled far too wide. “You’re not going to want to miss this,” he said.

And when he turned around to backtrack through the party, I could only think that he always gave in far too easily. But I supposed I shouldn’t have complained, not when the rest of the world was on the other side of that door, and I could see the glimmering green lawn calling to me. Not when I had spent nearly every waking hour with the incorrigible crook, and most certainly not when the moment he disappeared I yanked the door open, immediately climbing onto the balcony’s thick stone railings and walking towards the outer rim with only one thing on my mind: getting as far out of sight as possible.

It didn’t matter if the Duchess scolded me for an empty dance card later on, I’d left before with barely any incident. Albeit from a lower

balcony.

And most importantly, no one was there to watch me.

Not as Thomas disappeared back into the crowd and Claude drew people in as he always did. Not as William doted over Manon and Fitzgerald played his cards, trying to impress members of the Courts. Most certainly not as Kaeden spoke with his potential bride, one of the many girls to come through those doors, and tried to woo her just as she attempted to impress him.

I was alone, but only for the moment, and in being alone I was safe. Even if the ground seemed far away, the afternoon air was cold, and the wind blew my dance book into my legs. One leap and I could be safe for the rest of the night. One leap and I could hide and figure out how I would make the lie of a dim hunt reality the next day, and somehow stall my trial even longer.

“A soft landing,” I whispered almost wistfully, with a heavy breath and closed eyes. It was wishful thinking, but of course, that was all I had those days. Wishful thinking and dumb luck, I just had to hope it would work for me. It hadn’t failed before, after all.

I jumped, or tried to, closing my eyes while being wholly intent on disappearing into the night—

Only to find a pair of arms wrapped around my waist stopping me from leaving.

And with a head count properly taken and my guard well on his way to the nearest hookah, it did not take much guessing to decide who exactly was holding onto me.

I barely needed to look at him to know that it was him, the soft scent of vanilla and musky aftershave filling my lungs as his arm felt far too familiar around my waist, almost like it belonged there. “Kaeden,” I breathed.

“Alice,” he said, and with that single utterance, the world almost seemed to come back into vibrant existence.

JUMPING FROM BALCONIES AND TO CONCLUSIONS WITH KAEDEN HART

I t was far too easy to sink back into Kaeden's chest and let him overwhelm me.

Everything about him felt far too familiar and far too comforting, the warmth of his body feeling so soothing that it was almost akin to home. His arms wrapping around my waist for that brief second as he pulled me back against his chest made my body almost treacherous in nature, and all I wanted was to just stand there, teetering on the edge of reality on the balustrade for just a moment longer, if only so that I could relish the feeling of being held—up until I remembered who I was, and more importantly who he was, as well as the fact that I was currently meant to hate him.

My feet could not have hit the ground soon enough, and for what seemed like a great while, I refused to look back at him.

Largely because to look back at him meant to forget, especially at close distance, and I was all too prone to forgetting everything that I was supposed to be feeling when I looked back at Kaeden. He had that effect on me.

I once had a list of reasons that I hated Kaeden Hart. It was twenty-eight items long, took nineteen days to write, and was actually remarkably short for all the trouble he caused me.

It was an immense waste of time.

I threw it away the day that I moved into the Hearts estate, and swore never to make another one, because surely the act of pondering reasons to hate someone for so long had worked against me from the start and caused me to find more good than bad within him. I had only found twenty-eight

fatal flaws, and most of them, it turned out, I rather liked, which didn't help with not falling in love all that well. But now that what had transpired had... well, transpired... I didn't need more than one reason to hate Kaeden Hart, and I clung to that one reason with desperate hands.

Because for all he was kind, and for all that he was caring; for all that his smile made my dreadful knees feel weak and his laughter made my heart soar; for all that he was handsome and just a little daring—

He was still a horrible, lying, good-for-nothing ponce and I would not be indulging in the whole being in love with him thing anytime soon. Even if his eyes did catch mine with far too notable amusement, and his hand did not move from my waist as he tugged me from the balcony railing, causing me to collide with his chest much to my alarm. His actions left me to do my best to scramble away from him before I had to face the reality of his touch while bidding my plans to sneak off to the battlements or go eavesdropping on others adieu—as, unfortunately, I was faced with the unbearable likeness of Kaeden Hart, which was already more than most normal young women could endure.

God forbid I remember the way that he smelled, or the warmth of his chest against mine, or the soft brush of his lips against my hair.

Thankfully, Hearts Estate managed to save me from the discomfort of that by jerking the bricks I was leaning on away from me as I tried to save face, not only leaving me looking like a blushing, sputtering mess, but a fool as well.

God bless Ava for taking such good care of me.

And god damn Kaeden for being so observant when it came to me.

His hand caught me before I could lose too much ground, grabbing onto my upper arm and keeping me upright as he quickly jerked me around to face him, his eyes wide with surprise as I struggled within his arms. He let go of me somewhat immediately, causing me to scramble towards the edge of the balcony, but the damage was done. He had touched me and— more importantly— I had seen his face.

There was no turning back now, no matter how ready I was to run, each panting breath that escaped me only further reassuring me that I could make it a good distance before he would catch me. If only he wasn't standing right in front of me and blocking the way, looking at me with concern, like I was a woman possessed as my shoulders rose and fell with every breath, the air leaving my lungs in thick white clouds.

“You’re cold,” Kaeden noted immediately, moving to tug the suit coat from his arms as he gravely misread my expression, mistaking the burning of my flesh sent straight from the pits of hell for me developing a light chill—

“—You’re meant to be inside,” I informed him, tugging his suit coat shut before the traitor could somehow make the situation worse, his gentle concern somehow strumming a string in the back of my heart that I most certainly didn’t even want strung to begin with. “You have a date,” I reminded him, providing him with that fact in case he happened to have forgotten in the few moments he had been standing beside me and unintentionally left Anastasia Mueller (or whatever happened to be her name) alone in order to talk to me. “I’m sure she’s far more interesting than me,” I told him.

“You’re jumping off the balcony,” Kaeden responded, as if that were more pressing than Camila—Cabella? —What’s-her-name dancing about alone in the middle of a party, which really, it shouldn’t have been. Not when I had places to be and trouble to cause. I didn’t need to be wasting my time staring as he pulled off his jacket and held it in my direction, nor fighting the urge to take it as he blinked innocently at me, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Correction,” I told him, tucking my arms in close to myself as I shook my head and denied his gift. “I was jumping off a balcony. You just happened to interrupt me. But seeing as how you insisted on pulling me down, I now have to climb back up and walk on over to the edge again before I can so much as begin to consider the act of jumping from a balcony right now, which I likely won’t be able to do now on account of you having one, so rudely interrupted me, and two? Seen me now and likely developed a rough idea of where I am going,” I proclaimed, speaking haughtily, since I had learned he seemed to respond particularly well to that, considering the fact that nearly everyone else spoke to him in that way and he didn’t have much trouble listening to them unlike he very evidently did with me—

“You’re going to hurt yourself,” Kaeden stated bluntly no sooner had I turned away from him and set about handling the task of climbing back up. He didn’t reach for me, which was rather preferable, but he also made no attempts to retreat, which was a little less preferable. “At least take the coat, those bushes might stab you with the mood Ava’s been in,” he said,

like he was oh so helpful and I should have been thankful that he had chosen to go out onto the balcony—or at least that’s how it sounded in my head, though it likely wasn’t how he actually said it in real life.

I tended to correct his tone in my head. It made it easier to remember to hate him.

If I had my way, he wouldn’t be there. If I had my way, he would be back inside.

“Yes, well, I wouldn’t have to worry about Ava’s moods if I were home, would I?” I snapped, and almost immediately regretted it when I saw the corner of his mouth twitch downwards. Why his response still mattered, I did not know.

Actually, I did know, but...

My eyes drifted back to him, taking in all of the little details I had once been so fond of; details beyond his dark, wavy hair and his captivating eyes. Details like the fact that his glasses were always slightly crooked in just the most miniscule of ways, or that I’d convinced myself his mouth was almost heart shaped. He bore bags under his eyes, those were new, and I wanted to pretend they were from me. Sometimes I wanted to pretend everything was from me, like the worry lines between his brow that would someday sink in entirely, or the way that he wrinkled his nose in a similar manner to how I did mine.

In time, another girl would probably notice those details.

“If I don’t leave now, then I’ll be forced to dance with the Caterpillar tonight,” I admitted to Kaeden, putting my hands on my hips and almost daring him to challenge me.

“Unless I sign your dance card,” he said in return, raising an eyebrow at me.

“It’s empty.”

“I’d fill it,” Kaeden said with not a hint of doubt in his tone, his eyes meeting mine from behind their frames. “Easily,” he said, and suddenly I yearned for the young king who downed a whole drink before even looking my way.

At least the Kaeden I knew before would have had the decency to falter in his response, and not to speak so boldly that it made my words catch in my chest with a silent ache.

But I supposed that was the consequence in indulging in romantic notions with a man previously so shy—you emboldened him to say more

enticing things.

“Go back to your date,” I spat as I hauled my skirts up and swung my leg atop the thick stone balustrade of the balcony, straddling the flat top only to find him once again, annoyingly, standing in front of me rather than keeping his distance, which was doubly irksome considering the fact that we had a rather sizeable stone balcony surrounding us, and there was not a single piece of furniture anywhere to block him from standing as close to me as possible. He just insisted on standing beside me and inevitably getting in my way in the process.

Of course, he couldn’t do me the favor of standing still and letting me go about my day. Of course, he had to lean upon the railing of the balcony and look up at me with amusement glinting beneath his gaze. God forbid anything be easy between the two of us.

“Go see Alabama,” I said.

“Arabella,” he corrected.

“I’m not in the business of paying attention to the names of people who won’t matter to me,” I said, shooting him a look. “I’m sure she’s a fine whatever the name, but...” I started with a frown, not actually thinking that she was a fine anything, and perhaps refusing the possibility as well. Not that he needed to know that. Not that Kaeden needed to know much of anything.

God knew the last thing I needed when setting out to steal swords from Kaeden was for him to get the wrong idea and assume I was envious of anybody. Especially anybody involved with him, of all people, considering the fact that I was most certainly not—

A crash came from the smoking room behind me and I was forced to look back, exposing my face to Kaeden as I squinted at the windows and tried to decipher what was going on inside. There was movement, a lot of it, that much I could make out, but whether that meant much in Wonderland? Who knew.

Maybe Kaeden would have, but he was too busy staring at me.

“Your nose is green,” he observed, raising an eyebrow at me as he jumped to his own conclusions.

“It’s the light,” I hissed, ignoring the fact that in the background the evening sun was only just beginning to set and there was not a hint of green anywhere to be seen near me, much less reflect upon me. “Are you just going to gawk at me, or are you going to go back in and call your

guards?” I taunted, one of my legs already hanging off the balcony and the other well on its way to following it. If only he would look away for just five seconds to give me some sort of head start.

But no, of course, Kaeden couldn’t allow me that privilege. That would be too much. Of course, the side of his peach-colored lips had to tilt upwards, and the slightest laugh had to escape his mouth. “Gawk?” He asked, and I didn’t know why I was expecting otherwise. Perhaps I was just misled by the way that he had been before, when I first met him, and he was blissfully silent and wonderfully passive. “I like to look at you,” he added, a smile playing upon his lips even as behind him, crashes and screams continued to leak in from the smoking room.

“You’re awful at the whole having prisoners thing, I hope you know,” I told him with a roll of my eyes, throwing my other leg over the side of the railing and pausing for just a moment as I made the awfully dreadful no good mistake of looking down, acknowledging to myself that it was admittedly a very... long drop. And there was a chance that Ava had made it somewhat longer, considering the fact that the Hearts Estate never was all that fond of me and seemed even less so as of late. “I won’t tell you what I’m doing, but I will inform you that it will result in you missing a few things,” I said to him, trying to steady my nerves with a round of impromptu taunting as I faced my imminent demise fifty feet down. “Perhaps you should call the guards,” I relented, feeling suddenly nervous.

“But then Erwic would get to dance with you,” he replied, the smile at the corner of his lips growing wider for only a second until another crash sounded behind him. He winced and I did too, my eyes cutting back towards the commotion and deciding that I had limited time to do what I had to.

And that the drop down was awfully long.

I didn’t know how to even begin fending off the wave of nausea that overcame me as my feet hung over the side, an awful mixture of tall roofs and a sunken garden making the fall downward seem both awful and indicative of my imminent demise—because there was no way that I was landing down there unscathed and with my pride intact.

“Do you suppose that whatever is going on in there, it’s distracting enough that the Caterpillar would forget about me?” I asked, feeling somewhat woozy as I looked down.

I was going to die, and for what? To spite him? I teetered at the very thought, thinking for a moment that perhaps it wasn't worth it. Of course, changing my mind then wasn't exactly the best course of action, considering the fact that I was on the very edge and my feet were wider than the stone beneath them.

All it would take was one wrong move, one moment of carelessness, or some grand distraction—

Which came in the form of the cracking of a window pane behind us, the sound so sharp and volatile that it made me flinch and lose my balance, my formerly dormant fear of heights returning and a momentary realization of how high up I was dawning on me in the few seconds before blinding fear.

Blinding fear that soon led into hysteria when my shoulder was caught and Kaeden's fingers dug into my skin, his breath hitching, his eyes undoubtedly going wide beneath his overly large frames.

"Alice," he hissed, and it was no sooner than he had spat out my name than his arm went around my waist, frantically pulling me back as I clawed desperately at the air.

The two of us toppled back onto the balcony not by skill or anything like that, but by sheer dumb luck as the floor beneath us spread and the banisters in front of me grew taller, Ava having very obviously decided that I was not taking Kaeden over the edge with me.

But it didn't matter that I wasn't taking him over the edge, not when the two of us landed in a heap upon the balcony and I had to do my best to scramble off of him and get my wits about me, holding myself tightly as I slammed back into the balcony without another thought, scarcely breathing as across from me, Kaeden struggled to gain his bearings. He sat up, which was enough of a sign of life for me, but then he paled, and for a moment I almost thought him to be bleeding as he looked desperately above me for a second, only stilling when his eyes inevitably dropped on me and he saw me there, plastered against the balcony.

"Have you lost your mind—"

"You should go see your date," I said frantically, struggling to collect myself as I took in the ground beneath me and the stone pillars behind me. My hands moved on their own accord, feeling everything as if to reassure myself that it was still there—

“Get away from the edge,” Kaeden urged, just as quickly holding his hand out to me.

“I don’t need your help—” I began, but was cut off when he insistently pulled me forward once again, forcing me to sit in front of him. “I meant to do that—” I told him or tried to before his arms went around me. “I don’t need or want—”

“You’re green,” Kaeden interrupted as he pulled away from me, looking me up and down with livid eyes as if he were inspecting me for damage. “Very, very green,” he said, looking at my hands with wide eyes, “and the splinters I expected to be there are imbedded as well, maybe even deeper—”

“—Yes, Kaeden, I’ve realized that,” I said shrilly, mentally willing all the incorrect coloring to drain away from my face and leave me some semblance of respect as he inspected me. “Do you have nothing better to do than pointing out the colors of other people’s appendages,” I roared, attempting to rip my hands back from his as he inspected them. “Or is your life truly so boring—” I began as his hands moved to cup my cheeks and hold me steady while he inspected me, “that you hardly have anything to pay attention to other than my coloring—”

“Brown,” Kaeden concluded the moment that he turned my face up to look at him.

“What?”

“Your nose is brown,” Kaeden informed me, squinting at me.

I could feel my cheeks burn. “What is that supposed to mean?” I asked him, but my question fell on death ears as he continued inspecting me.

“No,” he concluded just a second later. “It’s russet—” he said, leaning closer, and I felt my cheeks burn brighter with the motion as Kaeden’s eyes narrowed from behind his wide lenses and his hot breath played upon my skin.

Without a second thought, I snatched the glasses off the bridge of his nose, frantically placing them on the ground beside me and leaving him blinded in an act of self-preservation. Or rather, something that was meant to be self-preservation, but failed utterly at being so.

“I’m nearsighted,” Kaeden said, hovering mere inches away from my lips, and I swear that I must have lost all of the coloring in my body at that realization.

“Yes, well—close your eyes!” I exclaimed, shoving my hands over them. “Or better yet, go away,” I hissed as Kaeden’s hands rose to my wrists, the man doing no such thing.

“I’m not going to hurt you—”

“I don’t want to look at you,” I interrupted before he could say anything else, yanking my hands away from his face and out of his reach, only to wish that I didn’t.

I regretted my actions far more often than I cared to when it came to Kaeden.

I tore my gaze away from his before the image could even register in my mind, my breath catching in the back of my throat and a heavy weight settling in my stomach as Kaeden went silent.

“I can’t look at you,” I said, as if defending my actions, but just saying it didn’t do anything, not when I had already caught the dull look in his eyes at my statement just seconds before. “Things aren’t the same, Kaeden. They haven’t been for a while,” I admitted. “You have no reason to expect me to wake up and suddenly want to be around you, to forgive you and forget what happened,” I said, my voice breaking. “Please don’t make me look at you.”

There were likely a thousand ways that he could have responded to that, but he didn’t. He could have paraded my old statements of love in front of me and given me plenty of reasons why I should have wanted to look at him, but he didn’t. Whether that was out of self-preservation or kindness, I didn’t know.

I didn’t know anything anymore. Not what I was doing, or who I trusted. Not why I was there, or when I would get home. Everything was a mystery to me.

Even Kaeden’s fingertips brushing past mine to collect his glasses felt unfamiliar and strange, though just moments before, his touch had felt like one of the few things I could recognize. Now?

Now he recoiled as he brushed my fingertips, feeling around for the cold metal and thick lenses of his glasses, then putting them on the moment he found them. It was only a second later that he scooted away, leaving me propped against the banister even as his eyes lingered on me.

I didn’t have to look to know that they were there, I felt them. They were unmoving.

“I just wanted to help you,” he muttered.

“I’ve already experienced your definition of helping me, and it didn’t go well,” I informed him, and then made the stupid decision to steal a glance back at him.

A completely stupid and utterly bad decision, considering the way that my stomach rebelled at the sight of him. I was fairly certain I’d hurt myself more than I’d ever hurt him with that statement.

“I’m sorry,” I murmured despite myself, but the words had scarcely hit the air before he spoke again.

“I can explain.”

Not a matching apology, not anger, not upset. Just a statement. He could explain.

“Explain what?”

“The mirror,” he said bluntly. “If you just gave me the chance, I could —” he began, swallowing as he looked at me from across the way, so little distance existing between the two of us, and yet it felt like we were so far apart. “I’ve wanted to for a while now—” Kaeden began, leveling me with his stare. “Please, Alice, I—” Kaeden stumbled over his words, a hint of fear running across his features. “Alice, I miss you,” he murmured.

“You miss me?” I whispered, my mind going blank at not only that statement, but the quiet, unsure way that he reached for my hand, the tips of his fingers just barely brushing over mine as he moved just the slightest bit closer.

“Every single day,” Kaeden admitted, his eyes not leaving mine. “To the point where I’m fairly certain I’m going mad,” he said, shaking his head. “Alice, I cannot go on like this much longer,” and a thought hit me that I could not go on like that much longer either.

I missed him. I missed him far more than I ever cared to admit.

I missed his smiles, his laugh, the occasional poking of his tongue out from between his teeth. I missed talking to him, touching him, and being held.

I wanted nothing more than to know what his reasoning was. Actually, I wanted nothing more than to halfheartedly listen to what his reasoning was if only to see his smile and rationalize my forgiveness. If only to keep touching him, and not feel so alone again.

But I couldn’t.

Not when Wonderland had other plans in mind.

I winced as I heard the loud screeching of metal followed by raucous laughter that was almost impossible to ignore, stealing my attention away and causing me to jerk my hand out of Kaeden's grip before he could so much as take a breath.

Something was happening, something awful.

Something that it was very possible I was not meant to see.

"The Jabberwock," I said, slowly rising to my feet and turning towards the door to the balcony.

"—Alice," Kaeden began, but he rose to his feet far too late to stop me, and even if he had stood up in time, there was no way that he could slow me down. Not when I knew him too well.

He could try to catch my waist; he could try to pull me back; I was certain of that. But he wouldn't be able to muster the courage to stop me from leaving him, not then, not ever. Not when I shot him the look, the same one that always made him stop, and almost dared him to defy me.

"Kaeden," I said, shaking my head.

"Alice," he said slowly, almost reproachfully as his hand reached for mine in one last futile effort. "Alice," he said again, knowing that I would not stop, that I could not stop, that I could not wait out there with him. "Alice, the mirror is broken—" he began, but his sentence was cut off by the slamming of the door behind me as I took off far ahead of him, scarcely able to consider his words before I was confronted with the reality of Wonderland.

A reality that my mind could scarcely process as I stood in front of the balcony door, gaping at it all.

"Alice!" Kaeden jerked open the door and called just a second later. A moment too late.

MAD AS A HATTER AND TWICE AS
IRRATIONAL

I t was a shock when Kaeden's hand caught my wrist, and even more of one when he tried to pull me back—but it was too little too late, and it did not stop me from glimpsing what was going on in the room, nor from tugging away from his grip and going inside to fully see what horrors the Wonderlanders had committed.

Every night, it seemed, they came up with a new game. One that would fill their waking hours when the courts adjourned so the trial would not dominate everyone's mind. Today's game had a name—Mock the Jabberwock—and I could not help but think that for all the Jabberwock had been the most horrifying, dreadful thing I'd ever seen; for all that it had haunted my dreams and terrified me daily; for all the Jaxton Walker still mocked me in the corners of my mind every single day that there was always a certain pity that I would have for him, because while they had bolstered up the very idea of me, they had shunned and humiliated the once proud soldier. All because he lacked a respected name like I'd had and had no cure for his beastly affliction.

The sight of the smoking room alone had made me shudder, and I could scarcely recognize the words that Kaeden tried to whisper into my ear as I looked before me, horrified by what Wonderland had devolved into in only a few seconds.

The smoking room was wrecked, and from their golden picture frames, I could see every painting in the room panting with Ava's distress. There would be no cleaning it up, not for days and days, not when the Crown Court already demanded so much from the poor Hearts Estate.

“Who....?” I questioned, my mind confused as to who could suggest such a torturous thing to occur, but then I heard the laughter and I saw the smile and I knew.

I knew who it was when they grinned at a time when even Claude’s cheer had ended. I knew who to blame when even Fitz was rendered silent, his eyes cutting across the space every now and then with guilt brimming in them as beside me, Kaeden’s shoulders tensed.

“William,” I breathed, and the hand around my wrist trembled, the man beside me shaking at the sight of the near demolished room as a painting of the Queen of Hearts sobbed at all the horror.

The Hatter had waited some time to pay the Jabberwock his due.

Shattered glass sat like diamonds on the ground, sparkling in the light as outrageous laughter filled the air, a group of party goers cackling as a wall of smoke hit me square in the face and clouded my vision. The music and wonder of the smoking room faded away into a distant memory as tattered curtains and ruined oil paintings lined the walls, the food from a near constantly refilling buffet smashed into every surface.

“The balcony,” Kaeden pleaded, his voice almost inaudible but his touch still lingering. “Please come back with me to the balcony,” he said, and I could feel his fear in the gentle caress of his thumb across my veins, the man obviously knowing where all of it was going as he moved to stop me, his breath warm against my ear. “Alice, I am begging you, please do not,” he said, knowing that he need not state what he feared I would be doing, as he had naturally assumed where my thoughts would be leading.

And yet for all that he begged and for all that his assertion of a broken mirror still lingered in the back of my mind, I could not stop myself. I had to pull away.

I would not allow such cruel actions, even towards a very terrifying man.

When I was a child, I had once asked my father why people sat back and let others do horrible things.

He had told me that it was because they were cowards, but my mother lounged back in her chair and raised an eyebrow at that, waiting until her beloved husband had left the room to voice her true opinion. She had scarcely even let my father cross the threshold before she turned to my sister and I and said it. “You want to know why people just stand by?” She had asked her two young girls who wanted to know too much of the world,

and while Mary did not reply, I did, giving a simple nod that prompted her to reveal her reasoning.

"It's because they're bastards," my mother said plainly with a rare swear. She was never one to let anything slip by. She believed in honesty and honesty at all costs. To say they were cowards inspired pity, my mother didn't have pity, not for people like that, for people who let awful things happen and just walked on by.

I could only imagine what she would have said if she had walked into the smoking room that day.

I did not know at what point Jaxton became more beast than man to me, nor where the line stood where I was willing to call him human again. I didn't know where the line between fear and pity laid, and a part of me wasn't sure that I wanted to, lest I found out something about myself that I wasn't quite able to face.

But I knew right from wrong at the very least, and I was capable of identifying savagery.

Savagery laid in a man on his hands and knees covered in crumbs and frosting, his eyes half open as his head hung towards the ground. Savagery laid in cracked red lipstick and teetering heels, the Duchess smoking and blowing clouds into the air he breathed. Savagery laid in the Caterpillar, his eyes watching as they always did and his mouth contorting in mirth as in front of the cage of the Jabberwock, a Mallard carried on a story animatedly, the smoke from his cigar curling in the air and forming the silhouette of a dragon swooning over a princess while a handsome king readied a guillotine by its side.

It was a reminder of what was to come for Jaxton, and likely for me, as the crowds parted and the last man beside the cage, one in a large elaborate top hat, looked down at the Jabberwock soullessly while his arm remained wrapped around Manon. He grinned while Manon stood there passively, her eyes empty of the flicker of fire that had once set them alight and the small branching cracks near the stem of her wine glass serving as the only clue that she was unhappy.

Beside the cage, the Mallard purposefully splashed his glass of sherry covering the exhausted Jaxton Walker with the sweet, sticky caramel colored liquid, the very sight sending my mind white with rage as Kaeden tried his best to keep up behind me.

“—Alice, why you look quite pretty, don’t you?” Said Bartley at my side, though I had scarcely noticed him upon my entrance, and didn’t care to talk to him then as I shoved his hand off of my elbow. “Ah, a terribly hormonal time, is it?” Bartley assumed as I stormed away from him, straight down the middle of the crowd and towards the cage of the Jabberwock. “Typical of a woman, really,” Bartley said of my rage, and I suspect he shrugged it off as I began to push my way through the crowd, Bartley thinking nothing more of it other than his own misogynistic thoughts.

I’m fairly certain that many of the denizens of Wonderland and Cards did the same, considering how my temper was met with indifference as I pushed my way through the many people I had met; through flowers and scholars, kings and thieves; scarcely getting more of a response than what came out of Thomas as I shoved him aside, his eyes alight with boyish delight as he took me in, speaking with a hum of laughter low in his throat and a grin sliding far across his features. “Ah, a show,” he said, and I imagined that at that moment Claude jerked to attention beside him, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly agape.

I imagined, however, because I did not see his initial reaction.

I scarcely looked anywhere other than at the one who I surmised to be the culprit; my eyes narrowed even further upon him when I saw the company he was keeping—the Duchess and a few stern-faced judges from the courts as well as the Caterpillar.

It was truly delightful company William chose to keep that night.

“Ah, ah, ah, Alice, I’ve yet to see you dance—” The Duchess began as she greeted me, her voice high with humor as the heaviness of wine hung on her cheeks. Unfortunately, I did not stop to greet her. Unfortunately, I did not stop at all.

Or at least not in a safe, suitable place where trouble would not find me.

Because that would have been smart, and it would have been good for me, it would have saved me in far too many ways—but it also would have killed the last little resilient part of me.

Which was why, though the Caterpillar’s chuckles stopped, and all paused in anticipation of me, because of the severe look on my face and the heavy set of my brow, I kept on going. I kept on going past him and

past the initial set of bars, shoving the man who had spilled his drink on Jaxton into the iron before he could cajole Jaxton into licking it up.

I carried on until I saw my true enemy who acknowledged me with reluctant surprise.

“Oh, hello, Alice—” William began to speak kindly to me, raising the drink in his hand in a cheery greeting.

I barely let those words hit the air before I yanked the hat from his brow, hurling it to the ground with a single, feral sound and immediately stomping my foot down on it before my eyes even met his gaze. I flattened William’s hat entirely.

William blinked.

Actually, I think the whole world blinked at that moment as William’s wide eyes looked over at me before lingering upon the hat on the ground, all eyes turning towards us and the party going silent as everyone seemed to realize what had just occurred, what I had done to the crushed brown velvet hat that sat beneath my feet. I heard Manon’s wineglass fall to the ground as the Caterpillar’s smoke ceased swirling through the air. The world struggling to process what I had done.

“Alice,” William said, or tried to, his voice coming out strangled as he looked behind me, obviously searching for one of his brothers amongst the crowd to come corral me.

I drove my heel further into the circle of velvet that had been the Hatter’s hat, twisting it upon the ground as William’s throat released a soft, high-pitched sound. Behind me, I could only faintly hear Kaeden swearing as he struggled to get through the crowd. I lifted my gaze to meet William’s eyes in the meantime.

“You are a coward and a petty monster,” I proclaimed as his eyes drifted back up to me, the whites stretching wide and his face going pale. “People should be glad that you will never have the courage nor selflessness to be the King of Cards,” I said, clenching my hands in fury as the world continued to watch and the long-legged man regarded me more seriously, his brows raising. “What you are doing to Jaxton Walker is abhorrent, and you’re behaving like more of a monster than Jaxton could ever be,” I spat, knowing exactly why he had done what he did; and it involved a certain White Queen. “Where your integrity has gone, I do not know.”

“And you know of integrity, Alice?” William asked as if it were a solely rhetorical thing, as if he already knew the answer to that and it wasn’t what I might think. “Remind me of how honest and kind you are.”

I floundered, my mouth opening and closing, but my eyes staying pinned on him, scarcely even humoring the crowd. There were a thousand different things I wanted to say to him, and they all lingered just on the tip of my tongue.

“—Let’s just put these things to rest for the night,” Claude’s voice came in a low, beguiling hum as he appeared at my side, his hand dragging across my waist as he rounded me to stand between William and I with a cunning, calculated smile. “I wouldn’t want anyone to say something they’d regret,” Claude began. “Alice, how about you apologize and put the hat back on William’s head—”

“—I’m not apologizing,” I said. “Not when so many people’s lives are lacking because William cannot—” I began, only to find Claude’s hand over my mouth and his eyes wide as he shot me a look, his brows climbing high into his hairline.

“It’s alright, Alice doesn’t apologize to anyone, it seems,” I heard behind me, and I knew it was Fitzgerald. I could identify his flat, emotionless tone anywhere. My eyes narrowed. “William, please have the sense not to take offense.”

“She’s not to blame,” I heard Kaeden’s voice again and looked to see his hand on my other shoulder as he arrived, practically panting. “I apologize, it is my fault—” Kaeden tried to defend me but was cut off by the loud roar of the Duchess.

“It matters little whose fault it is!” The Duchess said, appearing before me with a face so red that it rivaled the walls. “The little monster gets away with enough. She should be in the dungeon, if you ask me; smashing William’s hat like that,” she said, and I felt Kaeden’s hand stiffen on my shoulder as Claude’s nails dug in begging me not to say anything. “Have her pick up the hat and put it on his head, Kaeden. It’s your kingdom. Make her properly bow in the process. She should learn how to treat a king,” she began, her eyes narrowing upon me as the Caterpillar slid into place beside her, seemingly nodding in agreement. “Do it, girl,” she said as I felt my anger deepen, my eyes drifting to Kaeden, who only swallowed as all eyes in the room went to him.

“You’re the king of this land,” the Caterpillar reminded Kaeden.

Beside Kaeden, Fitzgerald straightened, his ears pointing straight up and his back rigid as he looked at his brother. Claude was silent but I could feel him twitching beside me, and William? William looked green at the mere proposition. A part of me wondered if something awful was about to begin, or if they feared my reaction so strongly.

“...It is alright, you know what, I have been a bit of a prat—” William began awkwardly, but the Duchess silenced him with a single raise of her hand, her eyes still resting on Kaeden.

“Kaeden,” the Duchess repeated in a measured tone, a warning resting behind it, one that I could hardly miss as her short heel clicked against the ground menacingly. “If she refuses, then have her properly dealt with,” the Duchess insisted, and my eyes narrowed further as my hand rose to squeeze Claude’s wrist, silently trying to pry him off of me.

That little movement caught the Duchess’s eye.

That little movement drew her attention back to me in full.

That little movement let her know what I was going to do, that I was going to scoop the hat off the ground and make a show of it, that I wouldn’t allow myself to be made a fool of. She could read it all in my body language and the way Claude winced as I pried his hands off me, she could tell exactly what I was up to as she stared at me, her eyes forming slits as she took a step towards me, her fists clenched.

I had scarcely the time to react before it happened.

There are moments like that, when the world moved slowly, but I couldn’t will myself to move. No matter how hard I tried, not a single muscle would bend, even as a hand was raised and came flying towards me, even though I’ve never been hit so boldly before in my life and I knew it would hurt, so I closed my eyes as I waited for it and held my breath, anticipating the loud slap of skin.

But it didn’t come.

It didn’t come for so long that I almost hated myself for flinching, for showing weakness in front of all the upper class in Wonderland. I hated myself for being scared, for the way that the breath caught in my chest and my shoulders slumped back. I hated myself so much I could cry, and I almost did, especially when I opened my eyes to find someone had caught the Duchess’s wrist with an awkward swallow, his face hesitant but his voice sure.

“Aunty, I—” Kaeden swallowed as he held the Duchess’s hand within his grasp, his eyes glued meaningfully on her, even as her face turned red and steam began to come off of her.

“Kaeden,” she gritted her teeth, her hand clenching into a fist within his grasp as I came to a very sudden and somewhat abrupt decision.

I needed to leave.

“Let.” The Duchess began, the steam rolling off her becoming hotter and more distinct as she turned so red that she was almost no longer red at all, but instead a rather dark shade of plum. “Me,” she said, gritting her teeth as she held onto her last word, her eyes still upon me and her temper so great that I was sure her skin would leave scorch marks upon Kaeden. “Go.” She finished, and she scarcely waited for him to release her before she lunged for me, but was unfortunately doomed to miss me by only an inch as I turned on my heel and began sprinting away, charging towards the barely opened door of a dark corridor as the Duchess let out a furious screech.

The people of Wonderland had no idea what to do then and could only scurry out of the way and gawk as I headed for the door, the Duchess’s enraged screams filling the air.

“Guards! Grab the girl and get me my cane!” She howled, her face turning a dark burgundy as she practically rocked from heel to toe with every deafening syllable. “I will have order here! I will have respect! I will have properly upkept millinery, and a basic understanding of the importance of a hat,” the Duchess shrieked, her words straining as she screeched at the top of her lungs. “And for the love of all that is good, someone get my precious boy another hat! I do not wish to see another vile little hair on my dearest, darling William’s sweet little head!”

COSTLY CONSEQUENCES AND COURTLY CATASTROPHES

“**H**ow dare you defy me, Kaeden Hart!” The Duchess screamed, her voice bouncing along the walls as it followed me down the halls, just as sharp and inescapable as it would have been if I had stayed in the same room as her. I could hear her stout legs moving quickly behind me, the heels that she wore to give some illusion of height clicking against the ground menacingly at a volume that would likely ensure the sound would haunt my dreams forever.

I took another futile breath as I rounded a corner, reminding myself of something Claude had told me once in the past; it was near impossible for someone to find you if you yourself did not happen to know where you were. As we were in Wonderland, I took that to be a fact.

The walls around me were beginning to get more and more unfamiliar as they filled with pictures of old Hart family members, all of them bearing flaming red hair and not a single one bearing a resemblance to Kaeden—though I supposed that might have been obvious, considering the fact that it was his step father who was the royalty in the Land of Hearts, and his mother had only married into the family. It was only with the occasional glance at one of her portraits that I could determine whether a hallway led to some place I might have been—which meant that I thankfully had to avoid her face entirely, and therefore not see anything that vaguely resembled Kaeden Hart as well as I set about what I decided to be my true task for the moment; getting lost.

Which was remarkably hard at this point, considering the fact that I had made myself far too familiar with the halls of Hearts, and just about

every corner either greeted me with a familiar relic or the sound of a guard's footsteps.

Even if Kaeden was still arguing with the Duchess, I knew that I had to avoid the guards. At least until daylight, considering that the last time I had upset the Duchess had resulted in the confiscation of my beloved pocket watch, and the subsequent gifting of said pocket watch to Thomas for the time being.

I should have much preferred to be lost, even if I did not know how long I would have to be lost for, considering the last time I had gotten into trouble with the Duchess I had not insulted a king. I had accidentally worn a dress of a similar color to hers, but now I had insulted a king. Perhaps I would have to be lost for the rest of my life as a result.

Who knew that I would go off the handle at William, of all people? The eldest of the Kings of Cards, and the one favored to take the throne.

I looked at the walls as I finally slowed my steps, the halls around me having thankfully become silent for the moment. It was hard not to remember the passage Claude had shown me once before and think that perhaps I would have to live in it for decades to come, living off rats and toiling away until my clothes were nothing but rags as a result. I was sure the punishment one received for insulting a king would last decades, and I couldn't help but look down at my dress and wonder if it would last that long. Could it make it until I was in my forties? Or would I have to resort to stealing things?

"—I am a king maker, Kaeden Hart! You do not speak to me that way!" A scream rang down the halls, and I decided then that yes, it was preferable for nearly everyone else if I stayed far, far out of the way.

"She's going to have his head by the end of the night," I muttered, a sharp prickle of guilt filling me as my eyes caught on a portrait upon the wall, a group scene that the painter had chosen to make so carefully detailed.

Phineas Hart, if I had to guess, considering the fact that the painting looked newer and the varnish had not yellowed yet, and the man in front of him lacked his wings; I could recognize a portrait of Erwic from anywhere now, the Caterpillar's face was so deeply ingrained in my memory.

Phineas with his light blue eyes and his thick red beard was nothing like Kaeden. I supposed no one would ever make the mistake of believing the young King was Phineas' as a result, but he had the same wrinkles at

the corner of his eyes that Kaeden did on the rare occasion that he smiled, and he held the same stick straight posture too, even as he leaned against the back of the Caterpillar's wooden chair. "You're just about everywhere, aren't you, Erwic?" I remarked, frowning as I took in his ever severe, unyielding expression, an expression which so heavily contrasted the look of delight within the old King of Heart's eyes. "Did you look just the same when you posed beside my father?" I remarked, having little doubt within my mind that a portrait of Reginald Grey and the Caterpillar existed somewhere.

I scowled at Erwic as I took in how truly dull and lifeless his eyes appeared in paint, my frustrations with the real Caterpillar practically boiling over under my skin as I considered his painted image, a part of me wishing nothing more than to punch a hole through the canvas.

"Everyone seemed to trust you at some point, Erwic, didn't they?" I said, turning away from him as I shook my head. "Oddly enough, it seems as if almost everyone who has ever dared to trust you has gone away," I whispered. I would not make the same mistake my father once had.

If the Duchess was a King maker, then I was more than certain that the Caterpillar was a tragedy maker. Which was why it was very, very important that I stay as far away from him as possible—and anyone else having anything to do with the Crown Court for that matter.

"Living like a rat until it all blows over, I suppose it is, then," I remarked, clenching my fist as I did my best to calm myself as I traveled further down the halls.

Maybe if I were very, very lucky, I could simply remain within these dusty, abandoned halls. The ones whose location I was not fully sure of.

Of course, that was so long as Ava did not turn me in. I could not help but glance at a few of the paintings on the walls as I passed them by, watching the expressions of the oil painted figures with concern as I tried to navigate the halls. None of them so much as glanced at me as they were too busy tending to whatever demands the Crown Court and the Duchess had at that moment, I was sure, but eventually the Estate would begin to look for me, and eventually, I would be found.

I swallowed heavily at the idea. After what I had done, it was likely better to remain missing for a substantial amount of time, at least until the Duchess had passed, and maybe William was gone as well.

But despite that, I still could not bring myself to regret what I had done. At least not at first. I felt no exhaustion or regret, not at first. Not until the memory of the Duchess's hand raising to strike me entered my mind once more, and I found my steps slowing and my legs growing heavier. My eyes landed on a small nook in the wall and my mind settled on that to be the place where I would finally rest.

At least for now. Perhaps I would have to move again later if the Duchess was still mad. I did not want to cross her, not again, and definitely not so soon. I shuddered to think of what she would say if I did, wrapping my arms around myself as I sunk to the ground against the wall.

No one had ever risen their hand to me before, not like that. Not so shamelessly in front of everyone, with pure anger in their eyes and a determination to make me pay. I could only faintly register the humiliation behind it all, really, and I hated the fact that if she had struck me, though I would have glared at her with nothing but hatred in my eyes, there would still be a small urge there, just a tiny one, to cry.

But I would not cry for her. I would not cry for anyone, not anymore, not when so much had already gone so wrong in the world of Wonderland. Or at least that's what I told myself, and yet...

"My, you'd think that someone who had just swiped the hat off a king and thrown it to the ground amongst such an influential assortment would look just a little more proud," Thomas said, and I was unsurprised, as always, to see him standing right above me, leaning up against the wall with only a forearm to support him as he leered my way. "Alice," he said, as smug and proud of himself as ever.

He always knew where to find me, didn't he?

If it were any other day, I may have kicked the one leg that was standing on the ground out from under him. If it were any other day, I might have voiced my displeasure with a growl. If it were any other day, I might have held his gaze upon seeing him, and yet...

"Don't worry," Thomas said upon catching my gaze drifting down to the ground, his tone bright and cheerful as ever, "I'm not here to round you up." I supposed that was meant to be a good thing, all things considered. Even though my stomach did still turn. "I'm a Hearts Card now, aren't I?" Thomas asked, and I could practically feel the wink aimed in my direction.

"You're still the Crown Court's dog," I remarked, knowing far better than to trust him, or really anyone, for that matter. Especially not someone

from the Kingdom of Hearts, not after last time. Or at least that's what I told myself.

'The mirror is broken,' the words echoed in my mind, but were so far divorced from their true meaning that I could not fully process them. It was only once I was alone that I could fully understand what Kaeden had said, and even then, I could not begin to decode what exactly that meant. Nor did I have the time to deal with Thomas.

"You didn't tell me that you were stealing away to speak to the King of Hearts," he said, his eyes still lingering upon me.

"It wasn't what I intended," I defended.

"Really..." Thomas said slowly, his voice low as he remained looking down at me. "Because I've heard rumors," he stated with a hint of a laugh, that small chuckle practically forcing my eyes to dart back up to him, only to find that while his lips were twisted in a smile, his stare was dull. "It'd be better if those rumors weren't true, wouldn't it?" Thomas asked, raising a brow at me.

He never failed to concern me, the way that he didn't so much as blink as he met my threatening stare always making me feel the slightest bit more frightened of him than I intended to be.

"Rumors are often wrong," I informed him, and he accepted it far too easily, giving the slightest nod as the light flooded back into his eyes and he offered his hand to pull me up.

"I suppose that in this case they must be," Thomas said, his fingers curling in the air as if beckoning me forward while my own hand hung idly in front of me. "You know, people are saying that you're in love with the King of Hearts," he said, "but I say that's impossible," he asserted, his head tilting ever so slightly at the narrowing of my eyes and the way that my lips set in a harsh line, demanding silence.

He never gave into me, unfortunately.

"It will always be me, won't it?" He asked, and it was impossible to tell if he simply said it to dare me to argue with him, or to incite some other sort of reaction. More than likely, it was the latter, as he watched my face carefully and seemed to lean towards me looking for even the slightest response. Perhaps if he had looked long enough, he would have found it.

Perhaps if no one had interrupted us, he might have gotten that something that he wanted, but a dull thud from down the hall sounded, and

he no longer had the time to wait for a response from me. I could see the slightest twitch at the corner of Thomas's eye as he looked down at me, shoving his hand more determinedly in my direction.

"Come, we should get you to your room," he said, but no sooner had he said it than another thud sounded, and he had to actually reach out towards my hand, his action almost successful as I gave into the slight trickle of fear that resonated in the back of my mind; but then I heard it.

"—Alice!" A yell filled the air, and immediately I jerked my hand back, my mind going numb and my mouth falling half open.

"Alice," Thomas said far more insistently as he reached for me despite that, but there was something about the way that the other voice called my name that made me shove him away. "Be reasonable," he argued, his hand securing my wrist and giving me a firm tug, as if to force me to go along with him.

As if I could when another voice called my name.

"—Alice!" The voice from afar called somewhat urgently, and suddenly I could not be touched by the Joker. I could not go to my room.

"I am always reasonable," I began to argue, but pulled my hand back all the same, my eyes dancing up and down the hallway.

Thomas snorted, rolling his eyes at me. "Alice," he said again, insistently, and yet I could scarcely pay him any heed.

"I need to go—" I argued, and Thomas frowned, losing his last hint of restraint.

"You need to go to bed."

"No," I replied, shaking my head harshly, peering down the hallway as I waited again for the sound of my name, only to realize that the voice had carried far away, which simply wouldn't do.

None of it would do, but letting that voice walk away—letting his voice walk away, Kaeden's, after what he had done...

I pulled against the Joker's hold, ignoring the ache in my arm as I eyed the section of the hall that I was certain I'd heard the calls come from and weakly offered my response.

"Kaeden," I said his name quietly, because it didn't sound right, his voice and the way he said my name. It hardly sounded like him at all, it was so throaty and strained. "Kaeden!" I could not help but call out his name again, struggling to remain on my feet even as Thomas pulled back on me, my mind racing a mile a minute.

I could not let him go.

“Kaeden,” I yelled, and finally, finally! I heard footsteps approaching, his call of my name almost sounding within my ears, but promptly finding itself drowned out by the man beside me—

“Alice—” Thomas said again, silencing Kaeden’s call as I shrugged off his touch. “Alice,” Thomas insisted once again, but I was already stepping further out of the nook, my eyes racing up and down the corridor. “You need to go to your room—” Thomas began, but his voice dropped off the moment that my eyes went down the hallway, finally catching a glimpse of the man I was looking for.

The King of Hearts.

I could scarcely hear the pop as I stared down the hallway, nor process anything as I looked upon him, knowing that for all Thomas declared that it would always be him that I loved, I could scarcely even notice him when Kaeden was around.

I didn’t even notice Thomas pop out of existence at that moment, I was so absorbed with the sight of the man at the end of the hallway, I could scarcely hope to process anything else.

“Kaeden,” I breathed, and though he rushed forward and collected me in his arms, his hands gripping onto me so impossibly tight that it almost felt as if he would never let go, my eyes could only rest on one thing... A large pink mark on the side of his face, and the broken metal frame of his glasses.

His head turned away from me the moment that he seemed to realize I’d seen, the tips of his ears going red as they always did, but I did not let him pull away. I couldn’t bring myself to, even as he flushed dark with humiliation.

A part of my anger waned as I caught the side of his face with my hand, wincing at the heat beneath my palm even as his lips pressed tight and he averted his eyes, obviously anticipating the way that my mind rushed to figure out what had happened to him and why—

Only to land on the reason with a gulp far too quickly, and to flex my fingers absentmindedly against his bruised cheek, the urge to kiss his marred flesh resonating in my bones as he looked away.

“Kaeden,” I said, but he refused to look my way. He did not say anything.

I was left to contend with it alone, the guilt settling deep in my stomach.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and rested my head against his chest, but I did not say a word. Even when the gnawing urge to scream, to yell, to cry—to do anything other than just stand there wishing it hadn't happened—overcame me. I held him tightly, and I did not let him go, my breathing not settling until I felt his arms go around my waist once more and his chin settle upon my head.

"It's alright," Kaeden said finally, but it was not. It never would be. Not when it was him, not when it was my sweet, patient Kaeden. "Alice, please don't cry," he whispered, as if it were his job to comfort me instead.

I was quiet as I buried my face further into his collarbone, knowing that what he asked was impossible, even as he caressed my back in reassurance. I could not help but keep replaying what she had said in the back of my mind.

'How dare you defy me, Kaeden Hart?' The Duchess had demanded, and since she could not strike me, she settled for the next closest thing.

She hit Kaeden.

"I'm sorry," was the only thing I could say, and even that didn't feel like enough. Maybe that's why I gave in.

ALICE BEHAVES REMARKABLY WELL, ALL
THINGS CONSIDERED

I followed Kaeden without question throughout the winding halls, my hand wrapped way too tightly around his as my lips stayed shut, despite the fact that in the past I would have peppered him with a myriad of questions as a myriad of differing artwork and rooms that I had never seen passed us by, and the question of the Jabberwock's mirror still hung in the air between us. Though I wanted to ask it all, I couldn't. At that moment, I could not speak at all.

At that moment, all I felt was guilt.

Painful guilt that grew with every single step as Kaeden's face turned away from mine, the bruise on the other side fading as he murmured a chorus of 'it's not theres' and was rewarded by the magic of Wonderland. He shook the broken frames of his glasses with an awkward frown, setting the arms straight once more with a simple flick of his wrist, but he did little else to acknowledge the reality of his situation. If anything, he treated it as if it were normal, the thought of which made me clench my fist harshly at my side.

It should not have been normal for him. The Duchess should've never hit him. He shouldn't have so easily tried to move on from it, and I should not have run. Kaeden should not have been left alone to face the consequences of my actions, nor should he have been so comfortable in doing so.

None of it should have been normal for him, and yet there he was, far more than embarrassed about his situation even though none of it was ever his fault to begin with. I had been the one to incite the Duchess's rage. I had been the one to speak out of turn. I had been the one to disrespect a

King of Wonderland—but he had paid the price. Worse yet, he did not complain about it.

“I’m sorry about all of it,” Kaeden had said as he dropped me off at my doorway, averting his eyes even as mine scanned so desperately across his face. “William was wrong, and the Duchess just does as she likes,” he muttered apologetically, his hand squeezing mine for just a moment before he stepped away. “It may have been a bit rash of you, but...” Kaeden trailed off, shaking his head as he finally glimpsed back at me, the smallest, saddest smile sitting upon his face. “You’re brave, Alice. And you have a good heart... Don’t let this change that,” he said, and somehow, I felt worse. A thousand times worse.

Everything about our situation at that moment; the distance between us, the emptiness of my hand, and the way Kaeden kept trying to act as if it did not hurt—It felt wrong, all of it felt wrong. Like I was living another life, one that belonged to someone else.

I love you, I wanted to say. I love you and I want to be touched and I want to apologize, and I want to forget that the mirror ever happened, because a part of me feels that surely if it is something that you have done, it cannot be that bad. I was far too prone to forgiving Kaeden, and this situation only made things worse.

But the words would not come. Nor would any motion spring to mind. It was like I was stuck there, frozen in time, the words lingering just beyond my teeth, on the very tip of my tongue.

At least it prompted him to close the distance once again, even if he only stepped an inch closer to me, I was at least rewarded when his hand rose to my cheek. “You need your rest. The dim hunt is tomorrow,” Kaeden insisted, his thumb brushing a line against my cheek.

“I hardly need that much rest,” I spoke, surprising even myself with my reply, and almost feeling as if I could breathe again with the slight laugh that Kaeden gave.

“I should hate to monopolize you and have you be off your game as a result,” he said with a twitch at the corner of his mouth, trying to convince me to go to sleep.

“Perhaps I should like to be monopolized by you,” I contested, carrying on the game as I took another step towards him.

“I should hate for you to risk injury,” he said somewhat oddly, a smaller, almost fake frown upon his face, though I couldn’t understand

why.

“Perhaps I will not be injured at all,” I spoke, further amusing him. “Perhaps I am the far more dangerous thing, and the dim should think to be frightened of me instead,” I said, relentless in the way that I approached him and not dissuaded at all by his step backwards. Not when he smiled, not when a tender grin spread across his face so softly.

“Surely a dim is a most terrifying creature,” Kaeden insisted gravely, as if that were reason enough to step away from me, and yet I knew that it was not. “Alice,” he whispered, his voice almost pleading for mercy. All I could think to do was offer him one simple, near sacred secret.

“Dims aren’t real,” I revealed, my voice low as I stared into his eyes, hoping that one admission would be enough to communicate something which I couldn’t otherwise.

If anything, it made him actually laugh, which was close to enough. It was enough for me to withstand everything until the morning, at the very least, and when the warmth flooded back into Kaeden’s features, it almost felt like for all I had lost to the Duchess, I had won something as well.

“I know,” Kaeden breathed, and I was sure then that I had fallen in love with Kaeden for his smile, and all of his other wonderful traits and features? Those were just side notes to the way he looked at me. Those were just small, inconsequential footnotes to the way his happiness made me feel. I could scarcely remember the press of his lips against my forehead when he pulled away, looking far too pleased with himself for that one small, simple development; a single moment of me telling the truth. “Go to bed,” was his one, simple refrain, and yet the desire to ask him how he expected me to do such a thing haunted me as he reached around me and unlatched the doorknob with no hint of a desire to stay residing within his eyes.

I did not relent. Not a single bit.

I held his gaze defiantly, letting my hand fall back on top of his as his grip lingered on the knob.

“You don’t forgive me,” Kaeden argued against my reluctance and the desperation to stay beside him that lingered in my eyes. “You said you could hardly look me in the eyes,” he stated even as his thumb brushed against the back of my hand, and his breath lingered just inches from mine.

“I could learn,” I argued, the need to steal just a taste of him rising and perhaps visible at that moment, considering the way that his eyes danced across my features, wide behind their metal frames as he took in the details as my hand tightened around his, my face imploring.

I could see the debate behind it all, the subtle doubt that lingered just beneath the surface. He wanted to kiss me, I could tell that he did, and yet... He frowned, swallowing as he looked sharply away from me, the little bit of confidence he had waning.

Things were not the same. There was a very real possibility that they never would be again.

“You will be at the hunt tomorrow, won’t you?” I sighed. “I always want to see you.”

“You always want to see me?” he questioned with a laugh, his eyes wandering back to mine as he shook his head at the statement with the slightest smile, only for it to drop just seconds later. “I will be, I suppose, but...” he began, and I felt a frown pull upon my lips. “You won’t be very happy with me, I’m afraid,” he said, looking me up and down. “I had to make deals,” he elaborated, but did not state what those deals were. I could only guess.

I sunk against the wall in irritation, not even bothering to hide my ire. There was no point anyway, not anymore. I’d already lost him, I was sure, and yet it still felt like he was just within reach, like if I closed my eyes and really tried, I could just grasp him.

“You have been asked to escort another one of those girls, haven’t you?” I asked, my mouth tasting bitter when Kaeden did not deny it.

“It is important to keep the Duchess in a good mood,” Kaeden said gravely, and I found my eyes drifting to the proof of that fact without my permission. My frown deepening as Kaeden gave another apologetic smile. “It’s not as you think—I have a plan, Alice. You need only trust me. Everyone will be happy,” Kaeden reassured as this time, rather than squeezing my hand, his fingers laced through mine as he looked down at me, silently pleading with me to understand. “I won’t let anything happen to you,” he whispered, tightening his grip on my hand as if by doing that, he could keep me there in front of him, as if he didn’t know how badly I wished for him to stay. “But for the time being... I just...” He faltered, looking away from me even though doing that far too obviously made my heart plummet straight to the ground.

“You just...?” I prodded, the urge to simply grab him and force him to look at me tingling at the ends of my fingertips.

“Until you forgive me,” Kaeden insisted, taking a step away from me.

“Perhaps it is best to spend some time apart, just on the off chance that, in case you don’t, I don’t—” He tried to explain, but I couldn’t let him. Not then. I couldn’t even let him think about it.

Not when I knew what I did, the fact that even when I hated him, I missed him horribly. Day in and day out, every waking hour. I just needed a reason. More than that, I needed time to be ready to listen to said reason

But I didn’t need him to give up on me.

I didn’t need him to walk away.

And I most certainly didn’t need him falling in love with anyone else. Perhaps that was a flaw in my character. Perhaps I had a lot of flaws in my character.

And perhaps one of them was behaving irrationally. That much I was willing to admit, but only to him.

I didn’t know what it was, if it was the fear of losing him, or the fact that he had done what he had done to dispel the Duchess’s wrath—maybe it was the fact that he dared to be the one to say that he missed me first, a feat that I could never dream of being able to achieve—but I made a choice then to do something absurdly stupid and to trust him just a bit.

Say the Jabberwock’s mirror was broken. I wasn’t ready to know a reason why yet, nor how it led to Kaeden lying to me, but I was far further from being ready to let him go.

My lips brushed against his cheek, grazing the skin where bruised flesh once sat before I pulled away just as quickly as I had leaned in, each breath tearing through me as I stared at him, perhaps a little shocked by what I had done.

Somewhere along the line small, simple gestures had become more meaningful to the two of us than any larger form of intimacy—which was ironic, considering the fact that Kaeden and I had initially started with a bang in my mind. Maybe we did everything in a haphazard sort of order, or the customs of Wonderland were skewed, I didn’t know, nor did I care.

“You are not allowed to fall in love with anyone else,” I told him, setting my face as defiantly as I could even when, to his credit, Kaeden did not so much as blush.

He pursed his lips and regarded me somewhat quizzically, but he did not blush. If anything, he took on a far more serious air as he finally looked back to me, seeming to grow steady with resolve as his eyes danced with interest.

“You too, then,” he said, somewhat authoritatively. “You are not allowed to—”

“I won’t,” I breathed.

“And when you forgive—”

“I will,” I said, my eyes locking upon his. “I will tell you.”

“The moment it happens,” he demanded, and though my eyes narrowed with challenge at just how formal it all sounded, I could not help but nod, the slightest smirk playing at the corner of my lips as I stared up into his dark eyes.

“Not a second later,” I affirmed, unable to stop myself from smiling, especially when he laughed again and let his forehead fall against mine, the sharp frame of his glasses standing between us, but a familiar warmth still filling my body.

It was inappropriate, of course. Wholly inappropriate, because what if a Crown Court member were to see? What if a concerned citizen were to pass by? What if someone outside of the royal family, who knew of our games, were to catch a glimpse? Then I was certain, as I always had been with Kaeden, that expectations would arise. That they would spot the two of us and formally look to him as the next king. But still, I couldn’t stop myself.

I couldn’t quell the urge to kiss his nose, or to wrap my arms around him and pull him down. Perhaps even to ruffle his hair.

It was only when the sight of my door was reflected in his glasses that I remembered myself, and had the sobering recollection that Thomas could very likely be waiting for me.

That was the only reason I stepped away. Without it, I would have fallen into something deeper. He made it far too easy to do that.

But the memory of the Joker was sobering at best, and I could not forget that danger still lurked just out of view.

“Just be careful that in the meantime, make sure nothing bad happens to you,” I pleaded as Kaeden frowned at my distance. “Please,” I said. “They would have a hard time replacing you, and god knows Claude

hardly wants to take on the responsibility of another land, even if the Duchess insists he's the best cat for every job."

At the very least, I made him smile again, and his eyes lit up as he gently gripped my wrist and tugged it further towards him, pressing a kiss against my veins. "Of course," he said, and I was sure that there was more to it, and more to be had if I were allowed to give in to the curl of my fingers and my desperate need to touch more of him; but unfortunately, the world was an awful mess of coincidences, and the once good luck I had experienced in Wonderland waned.

He's seen it too despite the step I took away from him; the near desperate need for a kiss. He'd spotted it with a smile and though he had previously stated a need for distance until he knew he was forgiven, he seemed inclined to oblige me with one. He was so close at that moment, so near that I could almost taste him, and it was far too easy to forget everything else as he leaned down towards my lips.

It had to be a rule, for all I knew, because there was no other way of explaining it. There was no logic to be found in the fact that at the very moment I had taken a step closer to Kaeden, awed by his unfailing kindness and very tempted to request that his lips fall upon me elsewhere, the door behind me opened and a low, croaky voice had come out.

"Careful," the voice said as Kaeden's grip grew tight around me, and his eyes shot up and away to look behind me. "One should be mindful of what they do in public," the voice, a familiar, ever authoritative one said, turning my veins to ice and similarly freezing every bone within my body as thick, powder blue smoke began to float on the air. "Especially you, my King, if you plan to get a bride by the month's end," the Caterpillar's voice came from beside me as Kaeden quickly dropped not only my wrist but also my hand, leaving me to stand all on my own. "Unless I am to understand that you intend to court Miss Alice?" Erwic's raspy voice was practically in my ear as I watched Kaeden step back from me, his eyes wide and his skin pale.

"No," Kaeden said quickly with a shake of his head. "Of course not. She'd rather have anyone else but me," he lied, because obviously, that was what it was to him as well, a lie. Anyone could see the desperation I felt with just a simple glance between the two of us.

The Caterpillar seemed to, I was sure that he was only pretending to believe the lie, considering what he said in reply.

“A shame, truly, your father Cornelius would have loved to see Alice wed to one of his own,” Erwic said as he sauntered into view, somehow seeming somewhat younger and more virile in his appearance due to the straightness of his long, plump caterpillar back, it could have also been that the clothes he wore were newer, however, and far less outdated than the other houndstooth vests he so often wore. There was no lint piling to be spotted on his new vest. “But I suppose there’s always time for that later, isn’t there, your Highness?” Erwic said slowly, his eyes narrowed perceptively. “If Alice is to survive her trial, that is,” the Caterpillar said with a chuckle, his stout arm reaching to loop through mine as Kaeden watched, his eyes narrowed but his mouth unspeaking.

Kaeden tried to speak, just for a moment. I saw his mouth open, but then immediately close. It seemed that he couldn’t get the words out, or had decided better of it. Maybe he had come to the conclusion that a simple raised hand was a far better gesture for the situation. A simple raised hand and a flat, performative goodbye.

“Goodnight, Alice,” he said, his voice devoid of warmth but the expression dancing behind his eyes making it clear that it was not because he wanted to leave me that way.

I supposed there was not really much else to say, not when the Caterpillar lurked within my quarters. All Kaeden could do was stand and watch as the Caterpillar took my arm, slowed by his many legs as he looped the pair of us around to enter my bedroom door, dismissing the King far too easily.

It was almost like Kaeden was never there to begin with, and a part of me wondered if, in Erwic’s world, that was how things always were.

“You know, I was uncertain as to whether you would return,” Erwic explained as I glimpsed over my shoulder to get one last fleeting glance of Kaeden Hart. “It was very likely that the King would have the estate move your bedroom, or perhaps simply store you somewhere else to keep you out of harm’s way,” Erwic said. “Lucky me, however,” he said as he pulled the door shut behind the two of us, drawing my attention to a wide eyed, rather alert figure sitting across the room, “cats have a remarkable inability to withhold their curiosity.”

I did not need to read Claude’s lips to know what it was he mouthed when Erwic turned around and looked away from the two of us. The

apology in his expression was far more than evident, as was the low chuckle audible from the corner of the room.

Claude may have been sorry, but Thomas was most certainly not.

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE CATERPILLAR

“I needn’t explain to you, Alice, that all actions have consequences,” the Caterpillar said in that long, indulgent way of speaking that was wholly his, the corner of his lip curling in a snide smirk that he would undoubtedly deny if questioned on. It seemed almost as if that whole night, Erwic had been waiting for the slightest slip up, and I had inevitably indulged him with a far too massive one. Now all bets were off. Now he didn’t need to pretend to be kind, or to have patience for someone like me. Now he could do as he liked.

And what the Caterpillar liked most to do was to lecture me and laud his all too superior power over my head, reminding me that he was the judge in my case, and not the other way around. He was the one whose opinions mattered, and I? I was the girl who had made the mistake of disrespecting the nobility of Wonderland.

It was quite tiring, and it grew more so exhausting when the theatrics began, because nothing regarding the law could ever be considered even halfway simple; regardless of what world you lived in, mine or Wonderland. The Caterpillar withdrew a little red book and placed a pair of glasses low upon his nose, and then proceeded to look down his nose at me from behind the little rounded lens of his too small spectacles, and act as if I were nothing more than a miniscule little bug in the eyes of the law... which was quite comical, really, considering the fact that he was the far more insect like out of the two of us. He was a rather large pest, if you asked me.

“While you were out canoodling with royalty and tempting them with your wicked ways, some of us were forced to deal with the fallout of your

grand tantrum,” the Caterpillar stated as I slunk exhaustedly across the room, falling into place beside Claude upon my bed with a sigh while I did my best to withhold myself from rolling my eyes at the Caterpillar as he flicked through the pages of his book. One could not help but note that the majority of said pages were blank. “I must say that while William may not have found an issue with your actions—”

“If William has found no issue with my behavior, then why would I be punished for it?” I questioned, squinting at the Judge as I did my best to sound as official and well educated as I knew my father likely would in a similar situation. “It seems to me that if the victim finds no reason to raise concerns about my actions, then perhaps what I have done was not wholly wrong? If anything, William stating that he finds no issue with the way that I behaved practically confesses to me that he finds issue with the way that the Jabberwock was being treated, a treatment which came from the hands of partygoers at what I believed to be William’s behest—”

“To state that you believe there to be an issue with the Jabberwock’s treatment is to state that you believe the Jabberwock to be of higher value than he truly is—” the Caterpillar paused in his frantic page flipping to inform me.

“Should the Jabberwock not be treated as every other prisoner in Wonderland has been?” I interrupted, narrowing my eyes at the Caterpillar. “While he is terrifying and capable of awful things, should he not still be treated as an equal—”

Jaxton was just as I was, wasn’t he? A person who had fallen through a portal into another world. The only difference was, he had not been received with open arms as I had, nor had he been allowed to return home as my father had. While he was still a monster, and a frightening one at that who haunted my dreams, I was capable of acknowledging that I had been dealt a far fairer hand in the scheme of things. At least until Erwic looked my way, and held my gaze, forcing me to break eye contact and take in the room once more, noting how everything in the nursery seemed more aged then, and how subtle flaws within the room’s formation came into view as Ava undoubtedly set about dealing with the smoking room.

More than that, I remembered a single, solitary figure who undoubtedly had planned to be the one to take me to the Caterpillar.

Thomas. Though there was no joy in his eyes, there was a shocking familiarity in the way that he stood beside the mirror that reflected the

room's scene, and in the way in which his eyes slightly narrowed to dance across my features, watching my response as the Caterpillar began to speak once more.

"You are not a child, Alice. You must know that in this world, there are some people that are just... inherently better," the Caterpillar announced, "higher in value than others, of course. You would surely not equate one like me with a ruthless monster like Jaxton, would you?" The Caterpillar spoke as he tore his book open to a single blank page, and for a moment, I could not reply.

Not because I was shocked to see he had settled on a blank page, because I knew the Caterpillar to be full of poppycock and slander anyway, but more because I did think the Jabberwock to be better than the Caterpillar, or at least I was beginning to believe he was, the more I saw of the Crown Court. But of course, that wasn't the type of thing people wanted to hear.

People wanted to hear lies. Positive, cheerful little lies.

"Of course not," I said, though it tasted bitter on my tongue. "Though there are similarities," I said, still feeling the same bite of iron that I had felt on my tongue the night I spent within the Deadwood forest with Jaxton hot on my tail, "I would never think you and Jaxton to be the same," I declared, because sometimes it was a relief to tell the truth, even if the truth lied within the smallest, unspoken thoughts, such as the fact that when Jaxton wanted to kill me, he set about doing it with his own two hands, whereas when the Crown Court very likely wanted to kill me... Well, they hired someone else to do the dirty work, didn't they?

"Good," the Caterpillar sighed as, beside me, I felt Claude's hand wrap around mine. "I should hate for rudeness to be added to your very long list of crimes, as you know it's a very serious offense in Wonderland, and could very well be... well, perhaps the most final of straws," the Caterpillar declared as Claude's fingers tightened around mine. "I should hate to have more than one monumental affair within the same week. It would be rather inconvenient for all—"

"—What do you mean, monumental?" I interrupted, because that was the far too preferable way of going about things in Wonderland, especially when you were dealing with the higher ups. If left to speak on his own, uninterrupted, then the Caterpillar would likely speak for hours, and I would never get a word in edge-wise. More than that, a small mobile in the

corner of the room, one that sat over an old, discarded pram and boasted small metal card suits upon its strings, stopped; which far more than indicated to me that Ava's attention had been garnered.

Which meant the estate did not know what he was talking about.

Which meant, as court was in session within those very walls, it was all too fair to assume that no one knew what the Caterpillar was talking about. No one but Thomas, that was, who wore a far too rehearsed smile. Aside from him, Claude stiffened beside me, his mouth falling slightly agape as his eyebrows furrowed.

It was decidedly very much unlike Claude not to know something.

It was also very decidedly unlike me to allow but a single second of silence.

"What do you mean, *monumental*?" I repeated, my eyes upon the Caterpillar once more as a sinking feeling began to settle into my stomach. His unblinking, very human eyes held mine even as his Caterpillar body continued to sway to and fro, his human upper half raising higher in the air as he subtly lifted a few more of his caterpillar legs than usual and the already immense wrinkles that sat at the corners of his sockets deepened.

"That is information for a later occasion," the Caterpillar said, causing Claude's nails to very suddenly dig into the back of my hand as the Cat straightened up even further beside me. "All you need worry about is the fact that, as a result of your less than pleasant actions on this night," the Caterpillar continued, "the Crown Court has decided that it is imperative that your trial be moved up sooner, or perhaps bypassed all together in favor of your sentencing," Erwic said, watching my response closely, "... and if you do not behave yourself, I'm sure that connections will matter very little in terms of your sentencing, and the verdict will most likely be one that you will not like."

My mouth was agape. "That's not fair," I declared.

"I'm sure you'll find that in any world, the concept of fairness matters very little in the end," the Caterpillar said dryly, shutting his little book and sliding his glasses down his nose. "All that matters in this world is that justice is served. It does not matter if it is served to the right person or even done so correctly. Just that it is served," the Caterpillar sighed, removing his glasses entirely and folding them up to hang upon his neck. "People feel quite better when crimes are punished, regardless of whether the right person has been punished for them," he informed me, setting his

chin back down so that the glasses vanished beneath the girth of his wide, thick neck.

A wide, thick neck which I would have liked very much to strangle. But I supposed that, as there was all manner of witnesses, and I was no killer, I would most definitely not do such a thing. I would instead glare at him and wish that I had, my mouth just barely open but the words never coming from it—mostly because there was truly nothing for me to say. Not then. Not at the risk of my very life.

“I’m sure, however,” the Caterpillar continued, his voice again very slow, very measured, and very careful. “That if we were to see a proper King of Cards prior to the beginning of your trial, rather than just the whisper of a possibility of one...” The Caterpillar said, as if it were a strange and somewhat peculiar concept for one to consider, rather than a pressing reminder of the fact that I should do my best to interrupt the goings on at court, “then perhaps your life would be spared,” he said in a somewhat blasé sort of way, as if it were merely an afterthought. “But surely you haven’t the connections to ensure that we will be blessed with a King of Cards within these coming weeks,” the Caterpillar said as he packed up his book, shaking his head to himself. “Such a thing would surely require some pressuring on your part, and perhaps the cooperation of a few friends, as well as the location of a proper queen, one far more... respectable than you,” the Caterpillar said. “It is unfortunate that the Duchess can only send one woman a day,” he whispered far too audibly.

It would perhaps be the only true regret I would ever hear from the Caterpillar as he slowly began to turn towards the door, nary another thought in sight. At least at first. Unfortunately, he seemed to have changed his mind by the time he had reached the door.

“...You know it is quite the shame,” Erwic said after a moment as his hand extended and reached for the doorknob, his every word measured and carefully chosen. “Reginald was a good man, Alice,” he said, as if my father’s goodness was a thing that could have been quantifiably measured in the number of times my father had refused to intervene during acts of cruelty. “I expected the same from you, really. It is unfortunate,” the Caterpillar said as he turned the golden doorknob and opened the pathway into the hall, “that you could not be more like him,” he said, as if it were a surely regrettable fact that he had to resign himself to.

I bit my lip and tried not to speak.

There was little I could say anyway, for the damage had already been done hours prior, and I was now far more officially on the Caterpillar's bad side. All I could do then was sit with Claude and Thomas and hope, while watching the Caterpillar slowly slither out, his many legs beginning to fill the hallway, that he would have mercy not only on my soul, but on others as well. For god knew that in the realm of Wonderland, guilt by association was almost worse than guilt by implementation.

"Oh, and, Claude..." The Caterpillar paused as he withdrew his long cigarette holder and placed it between his lips, one hand still on the doorknob and the other holding a lighter to the end of a long white cigarette as he very obviously savored the theatrics of it all. "Do be sure not to tell Manon of what we discussed today, or else there will be consequences," the Caterpillar breathed in, finally setting the end of his cigarette alight and closing the door as a large cloud drifted in, leaving the two of us stunned and Thomas on edge as he stared at the pair of us.

For a moment, there was nothing but Claude's claws sinking deep into my hand, a faint puff of blue smoke lingering by the doorway, Thomas's wary gaze and Claude's slowly rising chest, paired with the faint notion that some portion of me was already fading away at the very thought of my trial. One of the women from a painting that hung nearest the door, the one wearing a veil and holding a parasol as a young boy watched in the background, took a glimpse over at the door for what seemed to be just a second. She regarded it with a heavy expression (though one could hardly tell the emotions on some of those impressionist paintings when the brushstrokes were done so flippantly), before taking a single glance back at her son and then scurrying away. The sound of a door slamming shut signified to me that the woman in the painting was leaving the room, undoubtedly hurrying off to another part of the castle to tell the King of Hearts what the Caterpillar had done...

As the three of us still struggled to decode what it all meant.

All that could be heard in the room was the quiet sound of our breaths entering and exiting our lungs as all of us existed in such a stunned state. For a moment, it almost seemed as if we would be forever stuck that way.

And then there was activity and a flurry of motion, Claude's hand wrenching back quickly from mine. The Cheshire Cat looking uncertain of himself for a split second as he rose to his feet, his eyes cutting back harshly towards me with the glossed over gleam of a dazed house cat

slipping over his gaze. His ears pointed in different directions, and his tail flicked quickly behind him as it swept aside my bed skirt; but Claude's eyes held Thomas's.

Just as suddenly as his abrupt, alert posture began, however, Claude's head tilted within Thomas's stare, the peculiar way that he watched the Joker being reflected in all of its glory in the mirror as Thomas's expression became far more serious, his eyes narrowing upon his longtime friend.

"Well," Thomas said heavily to Claude, "you heard him," he stated, though perhaps he should have known that just saying such a thing would always be far from enough to stop the Cheshire Cat from settling back into his mischievous ways. "Claude," he said heavily, a frown showing on his handsome features as Claude seemed to contemplate him in a manner not unlike a cat observing its prey.

Claude sauntered from the bed, his footsteps slow and cautious as his eyes danced up and down the other man's figure, almost appraising him. He circled Thomas, momentarily biting his lip, the dark scarring on his face giving his expression quite the menacing gleam as Thomas straightened underneath his gaze.

"No," Claude said slowly. "He said no."

"That he did, Claude," Thomas said with a frown, obviously not expecting Claude's low, purr-like chuckle. "Claude, when you are instructed not to do something..." Thomas said slowly, as if common manners and rules applied after all he had done.

I snorted, earning me a rather annoyed look from Thomas as the Cat continued his prowl. "Do tell him, because I think I should love to hear your opinion on doing as other people would like you to," I replied, and I almost wished Claude would vanish right then and there, if only to further spite the Joker.

But the Cat simply had to play, and the Joker? Well, he had to stop him, didn't he? Thomas was now just another card in the Crown Court's deck. Claude knew that.

The Cheshire Cat's smile grew, his head cocking further to the side and his tail moving far more rapidly. "Ah, but you know how things are between Manon and I, Thomas," Claude proclaimed, his ears pivoting as the Cat seemed to come to a far more definite decision, one that his tone seemed to imply that the Joker should have known from the start. "It is a

shame he only thought to inform me not to *tell* her, for if he were far cleverer, I feel he may have thought to tell me not to *sing* it to her, or to educate her via interpretive *dance*,” the Cat proclaimed. “But *alas*,” he said without a hint of pity for much of anyone, “I suppose wordplay always has been a tool of the far more practically minded,” Claude said, trailing his hand across Thomas’s shoulders. “If you’re a true friend, however, Thomas, then perhaps... you would allow me this one head start,” Claude said, his fingers dancing against the edge of the man’s collar. “Surely the Crown Court cannot fault you for but a five second slip up, especially if you have no clue how I would go about telling her?” Claude said, popping up to whisper in Thomas’s ear, “I could even write her a poem,” he said, but I doubted he would.

I doubted he would leave much up to interpretation either, considering the way his face changed at the mere mention of Manon’s name.

And though Thomas could not stop the way that his mouth tilted upwards, one could scarcely guess whether or not he would oblige. Perhaps the King of Spades’ charms didn’t work on him, though I highly doubted that; Claude made nearly everyone want to do as he willed. “Claude,” Thomas said with obvious humor in his eyes, but a far more evident tension within his shoulders as he geared up to chase after the man. “Seven seconds, not a single moment more,” Thomas relented, and though Claude’s chuckle indicated he was irritated with the statement, his eyes flashed in interest.

Claude’s head tilted to the side just another degree, but at that point the amount he had cocked his head was so much that it was near unsettling. “Catch me if you can,” Claude whispered, his grin broadening as his body slowly began to disappear until nothing but a smile remained.

And with a pop! The smile vanished, leaving Thomas and I alone.

“Do not do anything out of order,” he said to me in the mere seven seconds that remained, and though I lifted a brow in question and acted far too innocently in reply, we both knew my reaction to be a lie.

The Joker Card that appeared when Thomas snapped out of existence had hardly hit the ground before I was at the doorway and wrenching the door open, determined to see myself out.

If my time was up and my trial was oncoming, then I had scarcely much more time to forgive, didn’t I?

More than that, I had to find a way to make sure that the Duchess would pay for what she had done to Kaeden, and who knew when the thick blue smoke and the sounds of merriment would leave the halls.

BRUISED HEARTS AND DAMAGED EGOS

I closed my eyes as I slunk along the walls, careful not to move too much or make so much noise as to cause a commotion and gain the attention of the varying Card Guards that roamed the Hearts estate before I could succeed in my current task at hand. God knew that with the Caterpillar irritated with me and the Duchess out for blood, the guards had surely been instructed to keep me far out of the common folk's view.

Normally, this would be when Thomas was on duty as well, parked outside of my doorway and waiting to be sure that I did not so much as leave my room, if only for my own good; but my most persistent and least unqualified guard was currently going about chasing a cat through the house, and could hardly be expected to stand at his post when Claude was up to no good. Thus, this was it.

My one chance for revenge. My one hope of paying the Duchess in kind for her cruelty. Which meant that it was imperative that Claude take his time. "As long as you like," I whispered at the thought, having decided the Duchess's actions to be a far more personal offense, one that would result in many regrets for her.

As long as no one saw me, that was. Which was a hard reality to contend with, but not an unfamiliar one, all things considered. If my father's clock were currently ticking, he would have likely been rather displeased to not only know of my behavior, but how he had enabled it as well, for it was partially his fault that I was so adept at creeping along walls and vanishing into parties, the act being all too familiar to me as a formerly rambunctious adolescent.

You see, my sister and I had not often been allowed to attend get togethers, though not because of the war or a lack of popularity, as some may assume. And certainly not because our parents did not indulge in them.

My parents did throw parties, and they threw them frequently, whenever my mother was convinced that there was something my father should want, but was not currently in the business of getting, at least not as fast as she cared for him to. My mother had a skill that neither of her daughters had picked up, and that waned in the presence of young children. Having grown up a rich man's daughter— one from a family rumored to have had a title once unfairly stripped from them for participating in one of Cromwell's various plots— It meant that my mother could talk, and she could talk well.

If given both silence and the opportunity, my mother could convince anyone of anything, and so she frequently did... which led to my developing of another set of skills; a set of skills that I dragged Mary along with while acquiring.

If put to it, I was very, very good at navigating the edges of a house during a party and never being seen.

Sure, the ability had waned a little in Wonderland, but...

I rivaled myself in stealth at the moment, and likely could have done no better than I was doing unless I was cursed to drag my older sister behind me and into mischief, as I often had been as a child. Not a single person had seen me yet, which was a miracle, considering the fact that I'd already been down two flights of stairs and passed by no sooner than twenty Wonderlanders without incident. The fact that I was getting so far at this point was nothing short of a marvel, and a part of me almost wanted to brag.

Another part of me almost wanted to lock up my big mouth and throw away the key, knowing that gloating would hardly do me any good as I settled in amongst the roman architecture of the Hearts' walls and hoped to god I would not get caught so far from my room. The last thing I needed was to let out the slightest exclamation of victory, only for it to be shot down moments later for having made a sound to begin with.

Trifling things such as breathing or properly celebrating my wins would have to wait until people were far out of sight, I reminded myself as another group of party goers passed me by, scarcely looking my direction.

I did not dare to exhale until they were far out of view, waiting for the stragglers of the party to get a move on as I impatiently remained glued against a wall, counting the seconds.

I let out a heavy exhale as a fish far out of a water and an elephant that practically dominated the room walked on, rolling my eyes at how easy it all was.

In the back of my mind, I already had a plan, though it wasn't a fully formed one, or a wise one by far. All I knew was that I had a plan, it was mine, and by virtue of that alone, I would be successful in all of my goals; if time were kind to me.

And the Duchess never found out what I had done.

Largely because I was going to lie. Which, all in all, didn't seem like a very bold thing to do, until you considered the way that Wonderland worked, upon which it all seemed admittedly just a little brilliant, really.

"I may not be able to strike back," I mused as I passed by a large, imposing shadow that resembled the Duchess without any incident, "but I can run my mouth, which is almost twice as bad."

Here's the wonderful thing about Wonderland: It very seldom mattered what was actually true, but more so what people were willing to believe, and it seemed that the Duchess, and all of those other high and mighties, were willing to believe quite a bit when it came down to it, even if it was about her and those she knew quite intimately.

I'd learned that during the whole fiasco with the White Rabbit and the Wonderland Wanderer.

The only question, when it came to spreading the lie that would inevitably find its way back to the Duchess, was who and what—And, I suppose, more importantly, why she would care. As well as how, exactly, I would go about spreading such vicious untruths when I, Alice, was currently rather well known to be a convict of sorts.

Luckily, however, when one asked for help (and was just a bit resourceful and creative at the same time), the world often provided.

I spotted my mark as I traveled down the hallway, having taken the long way down a flight of stairs I didn't wholly recognize, and ended up walking amongst the darker, more discrete corridors where drunk off their asses judges were currently setting about indulging in all matter of things, from cigarettes to mysterious potions, to the pollen that fell from petals on

the flower girls' heads—the hall having become a shadowy sort of place that naturally lent itself to unlawful and undignified actions.

I didn't dare walk too close to the stray judges at first, not when I was so clearly Alice Grey, a known troublemaker.

I scanned the walls and considered the unlit hallway a bit closer upon discovering the lot of them, searching for some sort of disguise. I could only vaguely recollect that the area I stood within was somewhat near where the Queen of Heart's chambers laid, the proximity of which did not even fully hit me until I actually turned to look at the wall just beside me and took in the decorations—

"My lord," I whispered, my eyes traveling up a highly decorated red wall, "that is somewhat spooky."

Somewhat did not do it any justice, of course, and it was only through downplaying the significance of what I saw that I was capable of looking at it all without choking as my eyes traveled up and down a porcelain covered wall. The sort of which was not decorated by Ava by far, but rather meticulously by someone else.

Painted faces of all shapes and sizes stared back at me as I swallowed, doing my best not to let my nerves dissuade me as I looked at several caricatures of animals and people, some of which looked so lifelike that you could have told me they had been plucked from the bodies of their models. There was something about their black, soulless eyes, however...

"Not Kaeden's for sure," I whispered as I heavily regarded the masks, noting the contrast between the stark white of the matte porcelain against the deep black of the rounded eyes of the masks, and the sharp red of their lips. It was unsettling to say the least, but, well— "He would never," I remarked, not all that certain what decor Kaeden might favor, just that it was hopefully not even half as disturbing as what adorned that hall.

I frowned as I looked far off to the side of the near endless mask wall, spotting an oil painting leaning against it and almost begging the woman in a black dress within it to come to life. I would have done anything for Ava to appear then, shaking her head from one of the portraits on the wall to tell me not to do what I was planning to, but the party must have left her too busy at the moment. Or perhaps, though it hardly felt possible in my mind, there was no danger to be found within the masks upon the wall. Even if they were unsettling and disarming.

They were, by far, my most obvious option, after all, I could scarcely disregard that. I could hardly approach anyone as myself, and it would take me hours to find another adequate disguise, but these? These were right there and ripe for the taking, even if one or two of them blinked at me when I reached towards them, the masks undoubtedly noting the wince on my face as every single one of them smiled wider, almost as if trying to entice me into grabbing them.

I only needed one, I told myself, and I would scarcely wear it for more than a second before I discarded it again, pushing the distinct uneasiness that the mere sight of the masks gave me aside.

I took a breath and chose the least unsettling one: a clown with a large, apple-shaped face and starburst eyes. It bore a large red nose and small red lips, the outside of which were outlined in black, and if I squinted and very nearly closed my eyes, it almost wasn't frightening at all.

If I squinted very, very hard.

I did so as I pulled the mask off the wall, turning it over in my hand and regarding the inside of the mask with some concern, as there wasn't much in the way of eyeholes or a mouth slit, and the whole thing just felt the slightest bit wrong. "You won't try anything funny and stick to my face, will you?" I asked the painted clown, and though I heard the slightest giggle from one of the other masks, it did not respond. "Okay," I said tightly to its silent reply, and closed my eyes as I placed it upon my face, surprised to find that once I had done so, little else had changed.

It had simply remained exactly the same, which was a first for any object in Wonderland, though I should have liked it to smell a little less musty.

Still, I had a win for once, albeit an odd, clown shaped win, but I rarely argued when victories were so hard to come by and I had far too little time to lose at the moment, since I didn't know when the party would end. It could be any second, which meant that I had to think quickly, racking my brain and willing a rumor to form as I took a deep breath and turned to walk down the hallway, trying to the best of my ability to come up with a rumor that would adequately upset the Duchess.

I had to be careful of what I chose to speak about, and the words I chose to voice it with. I could not say much about the Card Kings, that was obvious, but there were other options. Other, far rounder options. The

Duchess only liked one person more than Claude, after all, and I imagined her face if the right rumor came across about her dear Eustace.

The only trick was both scandalizing her and making sure that Eustace was left unscathed, or at least mostly unscathed in the process, a concept that seemed daunting as I tried to stroll somewhat leisurely down the hallway and make my planned bump seem inconspicuous.

A robin I knew to be a favorite of the Canidae Court seemed like the best option. He wasn't a part of the court, but he seemed close enough, and I knew he liked to talk—he'd do quite well for spreading fake rumors and gossip for me. Just so long as I managed to choose the right words to speak in the presence of the Robin as I carefully navigated the dimmed hallway. I had to do my best not to allow myself to be distracted by the titters of laughter that arose from two hyenas drinking from the same unmarked flask in order to do so, my mind racing to come up with the right rumor to hint at in order to enthrall the Robin and ensure its spread.

Eustace had to be the topic. That much was clear. But I didn't want to hurt Eustace either, not when he'd done nothing to me... And moreover, whatever I said of him, it needed to be something astonishing, near unbelievable. A scandal, of sorts. People only paid attention to scandals, really, and this one had the almost impossible job of trumping the size of any other rumor that might have been in rotation, otherwise it would surely be lost.

My limbs went cold as I neared the Robin, my feet moving quicker but my mind moving slower as I begged myself to think of something, anything, to cause a scandal. Something inconsequential, but tasty. Something far too unbelievable, and yet splendidly fascinating if it was true—

The idea hit me the moment that I bumped into the Robin, as he sputtered and pulled me off with his voice low with irritation. I could scarcely think to say much more when his eyes demanded a reply. "What is it, girl? What on earth do you think you're doing—"

"Oh, I'm so sorry—My mind, it's, well, preoccupied—" I began, keeping my voice low and scandalized, just as all the good gossips managed. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I thanked god for my mum's far too perceptive eye as I spoke again, my act intensifying as if she were watching. My mother could spot a fraud from a mile away if they weren't well rehearsed enough, and I was most certainly not well

rehearsed—so I had to lay it on thick. The moment the Robin's eyes narrowed upon my porcelain face, I spat it out, because a good rumor was always far more remarkable than the person telling it to you. "To be honest, it's the pig," I said hesitantly, though truthfully, I wasn't hesitant at all. "The pig and one of the King's proposed brides, I—" I began, but I cut myself off before giving any other detail. When acting scandalized, it was always best to cut one's self off. Especially if you were trying to sell the idea that the information you had was scarce, which I most certainly was trying to do.

And succeeding at doing, if the Robin's face was any indication.

See, that was the trick to something like this. One would give just enough detail to plant a seed, not name names if one didn't have to, then leave. People liked to piece things together, it turned out, and it was all too easy to let them do so.

"I shouldn't say anything," I said after a moment, shaking my head as I pulled away from the Robin and sighed quite audibly behind my mask. "I am most sorry," I began, but I wasn't. Not then, not ever.

Not when, as I pulled away, the Robin's eyes danced all over my porcelain features, undoubtedly caught between wondering if it was a mask or my face—and then deciding that he didn't care. He couldn't care, really, not when his mind was rushing ahead to its own conclusions.

The quicker I pulled away, the more I sold the notion that what I had 'accidentally' said could be true, and the sooner I raised my hands to hold myself as I walked away from him, the further convinced the Robin became. He read something from my rattled behavior, and as I felt his eyes watch me round the corner, I knew he was deciding whether or not it was true.

And leaning towards deciding it was the truth.

I needed only round the corner and take a breath, a single, long one as I steadied myself, to hear the tittering begin. Resting my back against the wall and looking up in near exhaustion, I counted silently to myself, reaching eleven seconds before the tittering ceased and the talking began.

The Robin had been a little long in his contemplation, but I supposed it was hard when you had bird brains to contend with. I was relieved when, finally, moments later, I heard him speak at full volume again, addressing the various men who haunted the hallway with him.

“That girl... you don’t suppose she saw Eustace doing something with one of the King’s proposed brides, do you?” The Robin asked the moment he was certain I was gone, his voice much too loud as it bounced against the walls, making me feel almost as if I could breathe again. “The Card Kings’ cousin, seducing one of his prospective brides...” the Robin said slowly, and suddenly, a rumor had begun to take shape.

By the next morning, the Wonderland Wanderer would drip dandelion yellow with gossip, but not before all of Wonderland began to speculate if the Duchess’s son was praying upon the King of Hearts’ prospective brides, or if he were simply far too charming for his own good like many of his cousins had once been.

It would paint Eustace as a ladies’ man, a true Casanova in a pig’s body, and discourage the Duchess from bringing anymore brides to the Hearts Estate Grounds. More than that, upon deciding that it was a lie, it would cause the Duchess to scream in irritation, as many did when they read the news and knew the things reported to be untrue, and no one would listen.

People scarcely listened when they had a chance to be scandalized.

And thus, my revenge began.

“Though I doubt Kaeden will be happy at first,” I muttered as I set my mask down and readied myself to trek back through the halls, forgetting the porcelain mask the moment that it left my face. “But I am sure that he will forgive me after I’m done with my whole forgiving him fiasco,” I said, and took off to make use of my night before Thomas realized his error and my Card Guard was soon replaced. “It’s quid pro quo.”

I would not get very far if half of the guard was looking for me before I could so much as approach Kaeden’s room. Especially not with my reputation. But if I managed to keep my wits about me and avoid any distractions...

“...And there one is,” I said pretty much the moment that I had thought it, catching the tail end of a conversation drifting down the hall, the participants catching my immediate attention when I recognized the low tones of their voices, silently cursing myself as I gave in, squinting down the hall in an attempt to catch sight of the participants. So much for avoiding distractions, my interest was piqued. “William and Oliver,” I muttered, stepping away from the corner where I had previously hidden away. “Whatever could you two be talking about?”

And there I went, tumbling down a rabbit hole again.

A CHAPTER THAT IS MOST CERTAINLY NOT
TITLED ALICE AND A RIDICULOUSLY SMALL
GLASS FOR LISTENING THROUGH AN
OUTRAGEOUSLY WELL-LOCKED DOOR IN AN
IMMENSELY OVERLOOKED HALL

It was a fact both well-known and universally unacknowledged that the less one should like for a conversation to be overheard, the more ill advised the actual having of that conversation was. Largely because it seemed that the more you wished for a secret to not get out or an opinion to be repeated, the more likely it was that someone would unfortunately come along and take note of it. That someone, more often than not it seemed, being someone who looked remarkably like me, who had a strangely disproportionate deal of good luck.

But I supposed, all things considered, that rather suited me. Even if I was originally meant to be making my way towards the King of Hearts and working on pushing the Jabberwock's mirror far out of my mind. The odd pairing of William and Oliver was far too enticing to ignore, and though I had initially had every intention of going the other way and leaving the political issues in Wonderland far behind, I could not harden myself against the siren's call, not when realizing that they were alone in the hall and that it was the Mad Hatter of all people who was forcing Oliver to attempt to withhold his biting responses as the White Knight slowly begun to drift back to his senses. Oliver tried speak at a far more tolerable and secretive volume as he continued to lead William along, but was very obviously annoyed at the man.

Why? I did not know. Where was he leading William to? I also did not know, noting that wherever it was, it seemed to be far from the party and the protective gazes of the Card Guards scattered throughout it.

I had long since learned not to trust practically anyone anymore, which was why I slunk near the walls and kept far out of sight, rapidly traveling down the hallway to catch a passing glance of William as I neared the next hall and the Hatter's big, fat, wrinkled cap served as sign enough that I was on the right track.

I told myself that so long as the Hatter did not leave my sight, it would not matter what little conversation I had missed, as the White Knight had calmed the Hatter's bellowing voice into a barely audible murmur—once I got close enough, I would hear what I needed to, I knew that much. The Hatter often spoke in a near circular pattern, and nearly always backtracked to revisit various thoughts that were still on his mind.

It was just the issue of getting close enough that stood in the way, because while William was hardly—if ever—aware, Oliver *was*. He had a sort of vigilance that I supposed came from being some kind of guard, while I possessed at most the skills of an immensely unruly child, trapped within the far larger confine of an adult's body.

“Still, none of the Card Guards have noticed me before,” I mumbled to myself as I crept closer, watching intensely for even the slightest sign that Oliver knew of my presence.

While the Card Guards may not have reacted, Chess Pieces operated on a wholly different set of rules, and I had to remain careful to stay far from the corner of Oliver's eyes. The last thing I wanted to find out was what exactly an upper ranking chess piece like a knight could do to a lowly pawn that had wandered into its way, and so I held my breath with just about every turn and fleeting glimpse backwards. I could only pray to remain just outside the boundaries of Oliver's gaze.

Luckily, William helped a bit with that, his shirt thoroughly stained and the man more than apparently half drunk and fully disorientated. Every time Oliver so much as looked away, William seemed to slouch, the teacup that he still clutched tightly within his hand having long since fallen empty as he struggled to remain conscious.

Evidently, my little stunt had gotten to him. Either that or someone else had managed to bother him, considering the conspicuous absence of Manon, who had, since her release from the locket, been glued to his side.

She was with Claude, undoubtedly, and had likely wandered away hours prior, having seen the state of William's now soiled new houndstooth suit and the state of his wildly unorganized cropping of light brown hair, which not only jutted nearly straight out from beneath the rim of his now misshapen hat, but was also glued to his forehead in large, damp clumps. His eyes were bloodshot, his teeth near yellow, and his limbs awkward in both crookedness and length; simply put, he was a mess, and though Manon could be a lot of things, I would never think the

elegant, stylish young woman to be anything but put together, nor could I imagine her to be the type to spend time with people who were anything but meticulous with their appearances, at the very least. She had most definitely left him behind; I knew that I would have if I had been left with a drunken fool like William, one who almost brought shame to all of the Kingdoms in Cards, rather than just his own.

If I were Manon, and I were both beautiful and extraordinarily well maintained, I would not wish to be seen with William while he staggered about in such a state. I would likely leave, running as far away from the man as humanly possible.

It was the only respectable thing to do, really. Even if William could occasionally be a fair bit attractive and a tiny bit charming—he was also a far too prominent wreck.

But if I were Manon—would I think to leave William with Oliver?

I had to reconsider the question, because I knew that I would likely wish to leave William with just about anyone if it meant getting away from him while he was in this state, largely because I did not truly love William. So, while trailing behind them and being sure to keep William well within my sight, I considered the notion of whether I would leave Oliver in the company of someone I truly loved.

The sight of him apathetically allowing William to stumble directly into a wall convinced me that I would not. Especially considering the way he left the drunk man to tend to the gaping forehead wound he'd created himself. I could not imagine that anyone who was well aware of Oliver's disposition and William's general... way of being... would ever think of leaving the pair alone. Nor that William would willingly go with the stiff, stubborn Oliver in any case.

Which meant that Oliver scooped up William himself.

Which meant that Oliver wanted something from William and was determined enough to drag the man out on his own in order to get it.

Which also meant that I simply had to listen in.

Happy days, really. I loved when things were easy, for they too often were far more complicated than they needed to be in Wonderland, and Oliver almost seemed to be doing me a favor by moving relatively slowly as he traversed the halls, which was a boon, really. He likely did it because William looked just about ready to spew at any given moment, but I

counted what little victories I could find, and worked hard to make the best of the two's unfortunate situation.

And thus, the wall. Or rather creeping along the wall somewhat inconspicuously as I inched closer and closer to the far too unlikely pair of men, hoping not to attract any attention at all and being, for the most part successful in that endeavor. At least until Oliver finally found whatever he was looking for along the Heart's Walls and came to a sudden, rather abrupt stop.

One that almost sent me flying out of the shadows and into their direction, but thankfully, it seemed that luck was on my side at the moment—or rather Ava—and I was caught and wrenched back against the wall by a shiny suit of armor, the red painted plate mail holding its fingers up to its mouth as if to remind me to be silent.

“Oh, now you're on my side, Ava,” I muttered, raising my brow at the knight as the plate mail shrugged, almost as if to say that the estate did not often align with me because I was not often in the right. Or at least that's what I imagined Ava meant to say, considering the fact that Claude had mused over the same notion just days prior when I'd begun grilling him as to how the Hearts' Estate could manage to hold such a longstanding grudge against me.

I sighed at the thought, reaching over and brushing the dust off the chest of the knight in a show of appreciation for Ava, having long since figured that the whole being a magic home thing was rather taxing to begin with, and only made worse on large estates. The knight nodded in thanks, which I took as another piece of evidence supporting my theory—

And then I suddenly remembered the fact that I was currently in the act of spying on someone, rather than cleaning house. My, it was really hard not to get distracted by the little things.

Frowning at myself, I turned to look back down the hallway and peered just past the chest of the suit of armor, noting that at the very least, William was still there. Though he was currently slumped against a wall as Oliver sorted through a wide range of keys, ignoring the way that a few of them belted out music notes to indicate where they were located on the scale as he very obviously looked for the proper key to enter his chosen room.

Though where his chosen room was, I could not tell, on account of the fact that from what I could see, there was no door visible on the wall at all.

Instead, there was just an empty expanse of brick staring him down, which would have likely disheartened most men in a place like England, but never really meant much to the people of Wonderland.

Just because there was not a door there right now did not mean there would not be a door there later, or that there had not been a door there in the past. Actually, the fact that I couldn't see a door didn't matter at all, considering the fact that Wonderland had long since proven to me that just because you did not see something did not mean that it didn't exist at all. It just meant that you weren't looking closely enough.

And I most certainly was not looking closely enough.

Muttering a stream of curse words under my breath that would have very likely made even a London dockworker shudder, I quickly dashed across the hallway, edging closer to the men and wishing then, more than ever, that Claude was at my side. The Cat would undoubtedly have some sort of shortcut or secret tunnel up his sleeve in a situation such as this one, and I imagined that would have been far easier than the antics that I was currently resorting to without him.

Mentally, I made a note to myself. Claude was now officially my friend again, not only because he was extraordinarily useful but also because he was similarly nosy and gossip minded. A perfect match, really, one who made just about every adventure that he went upon easier. Especially compared to when I tried to travel alone.

The fact that I'd had to fight back the curtains that I'd haphazardly thrown around myself was not lost on me, nor was the strange grimace on a portrait of the Queen of Hearts' sitting across the hall from me, indicating that it was all my own doing... But at the very least, I managed to get my head out from the side of the mass of fabric and sneak close enough to the White Knight to properly see the door that he was currently in the process of trying to unlock.

And promptly question how he thought he was going to get in there at the same time, seeing as how the door was no bigger than a mousehole, and was so small that the large skeleton key lock placed on the front of it took up nearly the whole portion of its wooden face.

There were no shrinking potions anywhere in sight, nor food that I could recognize to help the pair enter the room, and I doubted that Ava would provide for a man that was from a kingdom so far away from her own, so I didn't really see how Oliver planned to get in there.

Maybe he just wanted to take something out of it? I leaned forward in interest at the thought, only to watch as the man practically laid down on his stomach to place the key within the lock. His hands were most definitely larger than it, that much I was sure of, but he didn't seem to mind that in the slightest and unlocked the door all the same, using his leverage from the key to pull it open.

"Alright, William," Oliver murmured as he sat up once the door was opened. "It's time we have a proper discussion," he said, gesturing to the small door with expectation weighing heavily on his face, almost as if he thought the Hatter would enter it.

I furrowed my brow in confusion, inching closer to the edge of my hiding place as I tried to figure out exactly what the White Knight was on about.

William stood up beside Oliver with a groan, his loud, ungodly complaint echoing through the halls almost as if he weren't trying to hide at all. He shot the Knight a dirty look, one that accused him of a plethora of things that I probably did not currently know about, and began to walk towards the door. Only, the admittedly brilliant thing about him walking towards that door was that William seemed to shrink with every step, quickly going from being the tallest man I'd ever met to the size of a normal human being.

For a moment, I almost thought it to be a trick of perspective, but then I remembered that this was Wonderland, and nothing really ever made sense there. It was far more logical for William to be shrinking smaller and smaller to fit through the door at that moment than for the door to be so extremely far away that it merely looked like William was becoming shorter.

The idea became solidified in my mind when I realized that, while William was getting smaller, his hat was beginning to look bigger. Or more accurately, not bigger, but the same size, just cartoonishly large when compared to William's miniscule body.

By the time William had reached the door, he was no more than a matchstick tall, and Oliver followed closely behind him at a similar height, all but shoving the Hatter through the small door in the wall and leaving the Hatter's oversized top hat behind.

I didn't know why my mouth so much as bothered to fall open anymore, considering the fact that I'd almost seen it all by the time that

the door had slammed shut behind Oliver, and I really did think that I had been making strides in the whole learning to believe in the impossible thing while living in Wonderland. Evidently, I had not, considering the fact that I was still stunned when, just seconds later, the door opened again and a very tiny hand reached out to repeatedly try to pull the Hatter's cap in through the door, succeeding after a matter of minutes with some careful tugging.

"...Lovely," I said to myself once the door had clicked shut again, a rather loud lock sounding through the hallway just seconds later. "Now I am going to have to check every single mousehole I see before I go to bed each night," I complained as I grimaced at the tiny door in the wall and wandered out from my hiding place, disappointed to find that despite approaching it, I still remained a rather constant, well established Alice size.

A shame, for I should have liked to have been a bit shorter. I would have been considered far more charming in England if I were, but I supposed one could not get everything that they wanted.

And I, Alice Grey, could not catch a break.

I fought back a slew of internal complaints as I looked down at the door, unable to figure out exactly how Oliver had made the whole shrinking thing work. Begrudgingly, I resigned myself to make the situation work, praying that Oliver had chosen to occupy a rather unpopular hall as I laid down on my stomach and scooted as close as possible to the door, straining my eyes in an attempt to see through the keyhole.

I was rather surprised when I actually managed to do it, closing one eye and peering in, because while the door leading towards it was most certainly small, to say the least, the room inside did not look small in the slightest. In fact, it looked rather large and spacious, with a crackling fire and an assortment of velvet armchairs and sofas scattered about, placed in front of bookshelves that reached high towards the ceiling—because what was a room if there was not a book in it—and a large, antique looking rug that could have come from the Victorians for all I knew sat in the middle of the room.

It was a den, if I had to guess, as there was a wide assortment of them situated all over the estate, each one hidden far more cleverly than the last. People had often said that the Harts were a rather private family,

regardless of their crown, and so it made sense for the kings of yore to hide their dens far from anyone else's gaze. I'd found about five of them in my time in Hearts, and Claude had long since claimed that there was another hidden somewhere along the secret passages in the walls.

There was, however, a distinct difference between finding and simply knowing where a den was located.

"You've been roaming about, haven't you?" I muttered, sliding closer to the keyhole without a second thought as to what anyone else might think if they were to find me lying on the ground at that moment. I simply had to get a better look at Oliver. I needed to see his face, if only on the off chance that his expression would give him away, despite the fact that he was very likely the least expressive person I had ever known.

Squinting, I did my best to see it all, finally catching sight of Oliver as he set some logs into the fireplace and continued on with a conversation that he'd already begun with William, one that I hadn't happened to hear.

"You honestly do want me to look the fool, don't you?" I muttered, resigning myself to push my ear against the wall instead as I kept a watchful eye on the hallway surrounding me. It was more important to hear, after all. Especially when someone had gone to so much trouble to not be listened to at all.

Oliver's voice became somewhat audible the moment I pressed my ear against the door, though I had to do so hard enough that it created a seal, and I only really caught the tail end of whatever he was saying. Still, that was more than enough, really. "... Her blood is going to be on your hands, you know that," Oliver said, and of all the fragments for me to pick up, I think that may have been the worst one.

It definitely did not make me feel very confident in my current situation, considering the fact that there was only a finite amount of 'hers' that would likely be of any relevance to William, and I was one of them.

"But not the only one," I reminded myself as I clenched my teeth and dove back in, knowing that there were two other women whose heads were on the chopping block, and quite frankly? It was a comfort. It shouldn't have been, but...

"She's not happy. Everyone is watching, and everyone can see it," Oliver said, his voice low and unemotional as he continued, giving no further indication of who he could be speaking about. Unfortunately, just about every sentence that I could manage to grasp from the conversation

was like that, both incomplete and elusive. It really didn't help much at all. "She's getting desperate, and we don't want her behaving irrationally," Oliver added, as if that would give further clarity.

The man could very well be speaking about me, but then again, he could also still be talking about anyone. I grunted in irritation.

"My kingdom for a drinking glass," I proclaimed as I turned my attention to the house, only to have a small, thimble sized glass of water placed in front of me mere moments later.

I didn't know if Ava did it sarcastically or not, but—well, I frowned. I suppose that was a drinking glass, and anything larger would likely cover the whole of the doorframe.

"It's worth a shot," I muttered begrudgingly to myself as I quickly tilted my head back and downed the contents of the drinking glass, silently hoping to see a tag or something of the sort hidden on the bottom of the glass, only to be sorely disappointed when I realized that there wasn't one. This was it, no cleverly marked drink that said listen or something like that; just Alice and a ridiculously small glass for listening through an outrageously well locked door in an immensely overlooked hall.

Someone would likely consider naming the chapter of a book some ludicrous, remarkably overly descriptive title like that, and then ultimately decide that it sounded far too horrible to put into words and should ultimately be renamed prior to any sort of immediate publication. I knew that I, if I were in the process of writing a book, would rather lazily consider naming a chapter such a thing, and then sometime far later on awaken in the middle of the night with the all too pressing notion that I must change it. It was awfully stupid, really.

But it was a remarkably good summary of what was soon to come as I turned the glass over between my finger and my thumb and pressed it against the door, only to put my ear on the other end of it and hope that it did not slip in as I held my breath and tried my best to listen.

It really should not have worked that remarkably well. William's voice came through so clearly that I was almost irritated about it, noting how the sound of alcohol was still heavy in his tone as he very evidently paced back and forth across the den as he was often prone to do when nervous or upset.

"You know that it is not completely fair," William argued, his voice teetering on an edge as sharp as the point of a knife as he argued with

Oliver and undoubtedly neared a far more sober state of consciousness than he preferred. "I cannot be held accountable for everything. Yes, I have turned down the crown; yes, I had initially turned down Manon when this whole thing began; and yes, every single one of my brothers has a fairly good reason for not wanting me around anymore because of all of that but—I beg you again to think of fairness," William said, his voice low and pleading, almost as if he hadn't the slightest clue who he was dealing with.

"The world cares little for fairness," Oliver growled, and though I honestly hated it, I had to agree with the man. The world did care little for fairness. My adventures in Wonderland were very much an example of that. "You had a duty, and you were meant to fulfill it. You had a bride, and you were meant to marry her—"

"—Is it not enough to simply love her?" William replied, and the silence that followed spoke volumes, and was at least loud enough that I nearly dared to look through the hole.

The only thing that stopped me was the fear of what the look on William's face might have been at that moment, while Oliver's footsteps sounded against the floor as he continued to pace; the man undoubtedly casting William one of those stares that he did, the ones that made people feel completely and utterly useless.

It really would have been lovely to know exactly what the two were talking about. But at the current moment, beggars could not be choosers, and so there I was, trying to make sense of it all

They were arguing about the crown, of course, everyone always argued about the damn crown, but it also seemed that they were arguing about Manon as well, which I supposed made a good deal of sense, considering the fact that Oliver was the Queen's knight and William was her... Well, lover wasn't really the term to use there anymore, was it? I frowned, trying to focus in on the conversation yet stiffening when I heard footsteps coming from downstairs from the ear that sat closest to the floor. That was never a good sign, was it?

Neither were the words that finally escaped Oliver's mouth. "What do you think is going to happen to Manon when she finds out that the Jabberwock will actually be put to death this time?" Oliver asked, and I could not even begin to picture the look that must have crossed William's face. Partially because I had no idea what his true emotions towards

Manon were, and partially because I was currently a little too busy being overwhelmed by the raucous noise taking place downstairs.

Something was most definitely happening.

Not a Jabberwock attack, not by far, because that would have been far louder and more dangerous, but something else. Something bad.

A part of me didn't know whether now was the right moment to cup the glass against the floor, considering the fact that the constant yelling and stomping downstairs had grown to such a level that the men in the den could not ignore it. Oliver's impatient sigh was indication of that as he waited for some, any sort of response from the other man.

It seemed that William was choosing his words far more carefully for once. Perhaps too carefully for Oliver's taste.

"I'm not the enemy, William," Oliver informed the man in a tone of exhaustion, the obvious wear and tear of the chaotic situation unfolding in Wonderland had taken its toll. "But you cannot carry on this path for very much longer. Your brothers may have obliged you—"

"—No one has obliged me on anything," William interrupted flatly, having finally found a response. I imagined that Oliver circled the edge of his glass contemptuously in reply to William's insistence, perhaps even sending him one of his many patented stony glares. "Whatever you think you know about my brothers and I—" William said, causing me to wrinkle my nose in response. What on earth could Oliver know, really? What on earth could anyone outside of Cards know when it came to the men?

A lot, as it turns out.

"William," Oliver said sternly, his voice so hard that it practically screamed he was not there to argue. "You know as well as I do that over the years—" Oliver began just as the first footsteps sounded on the third-floor landing, echoing through the empty hall, and I found myself pushing my little glass against the door somewhat frantically then, almost begging the two of them to get on with it now, before I was discovered.

But of course, the Hatter could never give me a break, could he? "—I don't know anything," he interrupted, if only to put a stop to the guard's chiding, as if irritated that the conversation had even started to take place to begin with.

William sounded sober then, far more grounded than I had ever known him to sound before, and also angry. Very, very angry.

Far too angry to let any rational conversation take place.

Oliver had to know that, at the very least, considering the way that he likely regarded William as he whispered out an acknowledgement of the fact that footsteps were drawing nearer by the second, thundering through the halls. “The Duchess,” he said in acknowledgement, automatically knowing what was wrong. “Alice must have done something,” he said, because apparently people naturally assumed that I had done something all the time at this point, a fact that quite frankly insulted me...

Until I realized that I had, in fact, done something of note and not realized the amount of trouble that would immediately occur as a result.

I did not expect the Duchess to flood the halls with guards before the story even went to print, while it was still spreading on lips that became chapped with the untruth of it all; it seemed the Duchess was going to find the originator of my little rumor and make an example out of them *that night*.

And if luck was not on my side, she would very likely find said originator to be me. The thought alone made me freeze in terror.

Truth be told, I was not sure if what Oliver had to say was worth being a made an example of twice in one day. It was only because I had granted myself but five seconds more, and Oliver had practically spat the statement out in no more than a few breaths that I was able to catch anything at all before I had to dart far away from the door.

“William,” he said in the final moments before I left. “If you do not take the crown now, someone else will, and I have it on good authority that regardless of your feelings, whether it is friend or foe, family or stranger—you will not like the person who is looking to steal your throne,” the White Knight said just before the Crown Court Guards neared the end of the hall, the man choosing to end his conversation on a rather ominous note; “no one will.”

And in the world of Wonderland, where dignitaries used to play croquet with living mallets and hedgehog balls, where court was simply entertainment and beheadings little more than a formality, where the law dictated on which days men of the lower class could and could not wear a hat—One had to wonder what one had to do in order to have the favor of truly no one.

I, in particular, did not care to learn.

THE DIM HUNTERS

I did not get to speak to Kaeden that night, even though I desperately wished that I could. It was a risk that I couldn't take, not when the Crown Court's guards filled the halls, and the whisper of a rumor still floated on the air. But I wished that I saw him. I wished that I had gone into his room and wrapped my arms around him, holding him tightly and pulling him firmly against me.

I had reached the point where I had finally begun to miss Kaeden horribly. It was quite disturbing, really, and by the time I had reached my room and snuck out of range of the guards, I could only fall back against my bed in disappointment, wishing that he were there.

It was to the point where I could almost see him as I laid awake in the middle of the night, and could imagine that the space on the bed beside me dipped with his weight. I could picture the way that his tired hands would weave through mine, his body settling close and his mouth not touching me but merely breathing softly over my pulse points as he pulled me onto his body. I imagined his arms enveloping me, his soft sigh, and the reassurance that all would be well.

It felt like reality, even if it was just a waking dream and I was fairly certain that I had lasted the entire night without any sleep.

If I did sleep, I remained in that same dreamlike state for far too long, because Thomas was not the one to pick me up from my rooms, despite the fact that he had taken me nearly everywhere for the past month, and Claude was not the one to greet me first in the morning, despite the fact that I stared him straight in the eyes, and watched how he eyed Thomas from across the dining room table with each calculated bite of his

breakfast—his every other word being a barb aimed in the Joker’s direction. More than that, the King—who normally took breakfast with those currently visiting Hearts Estate every morning— was nowhere in sight, despite the fact that the Duchess’s paltry offering for a bride had been primped and preened within an inch of her life in preparation of seeing him. The Duchess’s choice picked at her food halfheartedly just as I did, and I could not help but wonder if she too was worried about where he could be.

I did not like the idea of him being anywhere near the Duchess, not after all that I had seen. Even if she was rightfully flustered at that moment as wave after wave of gossip echoed through the halls. Two giggling girls recounting the very story that I had crafted sat across from me, grabbing my attention as I absentmindedly defiled my breakfast and kept one eye aimed towards the hall.

“Sit up straight,” a voice to my side reminded me, further jarring me awake with his mere presence. “You do not wish them to think you to be slovenly, do you?” Fitzgerald asked, stabbing the green asparagus that sat nearest to his eggs with almost predator-like precision before twisting the overcooked vegetable harshly around his fork.

Fitz cared an awful lot about appearances, and yet ignored the fact that his very existence in the Hearts Estate at that time was a quite interesting choice for one to make, despite the fact that the King of Hearts was his younger brother.

I did my best to ignore him as I turned back to my food, mumbling his words but purposefully marring them all. Fitzgerald did not get to say that I was slovenly, nor pretend that other people would care at all. Not when quite a few eyes were glued to him, flitting between him and a glimpse of his cousin who was seen in the hall, squealing in confusion at the budding interest many young women had now begun to display in the pig.

Though I still was not fully sure whether Eustace was an animalfolk or simply an animal that was very lucky to have been treated like a folk due to the Duchess’s insistence of his personhood, at the very least, I could say that he was acting far more humanlike than Fitz had been since I had first spotted the Rabbit that morning.

Fitz’s mere appearance was a spectacle. Despite the fact that Fitz and Kaeden were far from friends, or even cordially friendly, the Rabbit sat at the dining room table and behaved somewhat civilly within the Hearts

estate, not stating a single bad thing about the décor or the manners of the people residing there for a matter of hours. Actually, he did more than that; for the Rabbit had arrived late in the night the previous day, likely between the hours of the Caterpillar's untimely visit and the Duchess's embarrassed calls, and he had apparently held audience with Kaeden. He never mentioned what he held audience with him about, but whatever it was, it had apparently taken hours and left him in a rather odd mood, prompting him to retire to his dusty, unused rooms, and go to bed shortly after speaking with Kaeden; not daring to mention even a single word of what the two had discussed to anyone at all.

He was hardly acting like Fitzgerald, to say the least.

He had made an effort to sit closer to me the following morning as the result of said talks, only to end up staring my way, his leg bouncing incessantly and his once pristine white gloves bearing stains as he turned them over again and again on the table in front of him until the issue of food was pushed out of the way, his cheeks flushing an unfamiliar pink as he continued to prattle on in my left ear. How he could have managed to talk more than usual, I did not know, but he did it.

"...Of course everyone knows now, between Ava and Claude... this is why I like the Burrow, much better at keeping secrets...you should see my kingdom now...Diamonds is much better in the spring," he said, and though his words may have made full sentences with just those tidbits alone, I could not be sure, for my mind continued to drift further and further away as my eyes alternated between watching the clock and the open doors leading into the hallway, my lips drawing closed as the clock passed noon.

No one would take breakfast after noon in Wonderland, for all knew that was the beginning of the hours long affair known as teatime, and to disregard that was illegal.

Of course, those who chose to partake in teatime were within the tearoom rather than the dining room, but that was merely a formality, so I rose to my feet, knowing that I would have a better chance of finding Kaeden in the tearoom—

"Ah, is it that time already?" One of the Cards asked, catching sight of the clockface as I stood. The Card Guard's eyes went wide and the man checked, and rechecked his watch at that very moment, as if reevaluating to see if the two times matched.

Another card, a four, looked frantically at her wrist as well, shooting a shocked look over to her companion. “Yes, it is—noon o’ five,” she said, because some of the cards had such an odd way of telling you things, and though I had tried to correct such mistakes in the past, I had long since learned that there was no point. “We are nearly two minutes off from being late,” she said, because in Wonderland, you always had to be two minutes off from something—and in Wonderland, being late was both a very good and a very bad thing.

In this case, it seemed to be bad, considering the way that the two cards scurried towards the door and cast shocked looks at the other guests, having obviously been hindered by my insistence just days prior that the chiming of a clock more often than not scared the mythical dim.

“To the door, to the door, people!” the Cards called, and even though I had gotten up to leave for the tearoom, I was swept into the madness against my will, and led out with a small group into the hall, even though that was far from where I wanted to be.

Even though I swore I caught the slightest hint of wavy dark hair out of the corner of my eyes down the hall within mere seconds of beginning to trail behind the cards and almost moved to follow it as Claude and Thomas passed me by.

A large, gloved hand caught mine instead, the wrist a most dark, forest green as the Rabbit stopped me and pulled me along despite my irritated huff.

I told myself that the wavy cropping of hair I had seen at the end of the hallway was only an illusion, but that did not settle me much either. Nothing seemed to settle me, nor put a stop to my persistent frown.

“You seem upset today,” Fitz said. He needn’t have said anymore as we were led through the Hearts halls out towards the lawn for the fictional hunt I had proposed. Largely because he never did know when it was imperative to keep his mouth shut. “I’m sure they won’t sentence you to rot in a cell forever,” he said, as if it were only a half certainty in his mind, and he felt that his words alone should have comforted me. I grew stiff at the statement in response. “Not that...” He floundered upon my growing grimace as my eyes cut away from him, trying to find the right words as his hand squeezed mine. “I wouldn’t let anything happen to you,” Fitz said finally after a moment as I held my tongue and tried not to say anything at all.

Not when the Caterpillar lurked so close, being led into the Hearts Courtyard among a group led by a number seven card. Decorum was probably for the best then. At least so long as any member of the courts was within hearing distance.

“There is something I wish to discuss with you today,” the Rabbit added somewhat nervously, as if he wondered if I would have the time and dreaded the very possibility that I could shake my head and say no.

“Unfortunately,” I said as my eyes scanned the crowds and tried and failed to once again locate the young king. “There are things of importance I must tend to,” I stated, because matters with the Rabbit were more often than not all too unimportant, filled with bland, mundane worries that he held, such as the suitability of the shoes I wore or the length of my stockings.

It was best to avoid him if I were to find a way out of my situation.

“This is important, Alice,” Fitzgerald insisted, and I wished to counter him at that moment with the fact that just about everything in his opinion was important, at least in his eyes. “They’ll be having partners for the hunt,” Fitz informed me as person after person filled the cobblestone courtyard, staying in their tightly knit groups as most seemed to find no reason for leaving the companions they’d been visiting just moments prior. Not when the rules were being read out at the very least.

“Unfortunately, I already have a partner in mind,” I half lied, trying to dismiss the Rabbit as the Cards withdrew scrolls laying out the rules from their pockets, the long parchment rolling across the ground as my grand distraction began.

I could only hope the hunt would last forever.

I could only hope the rules would take hours, and all would be so engrossed that they would pay no attention to me. Not when Wonderlanders took such pride in listening to rules and finding clever ways to circumvent them.

“There will be no open toed shoes!” Yelled a three of Hearts from across the pavilion as the Cards in front of us struggled to unravel their scroll, undoubtedly preparing for an all-out screaming match as they sought to be the ones to best enunciate the rules. “Dims are quite fond of nibbling toes!” The Card announced as another card managed to wrangle its scroll and begin to scream rules in unison with it.

“There will be no hair grabbing! As loose hair attracts the Dim’s unknown predators!” Screamed the Five of Hearts, and though I tried to take the opportunity to leave at that very second, before the volume grew too great and the rules too ridiculous, Fitzgerald’s hand caught me.

“No,” Fitz said, the Rabbit’s hand wrapping around my own and feeling far less warm and inviting when compared to the bare skin of his young brothers’ palms. “Alice, this is serious,” he proclaimed as, finally, I saw Kaeden enter the courtyard.

“One could say that far too much in this world is taken seriously, and it may be within our best interests to take things lightly for once, and behave patiently in kind,” I countered, pulling upon Fitz’s hand as the King of Hearts entered the pavilion, his Card Guards flanking him as he engaged in animated conversation, piquing my interest.

“Time is hardly on our side, Alice” the Rabbit hissed, refusing to relinquish my hand. “You can be certain of that, as I am willing to sacrifice my chance at the Dim.”

“Oh please,” I said tartly, “there is no—”

“—Alice and I will be paired together,” Fitz declared, somehow speaking louder than the Card Guards as he declared it so, ultimately setting about a frenzy of other partners beginning to announce their status with far less elegance than Fitz as the Card Guards continued to struggle through the rules. He just held up our hands with such authority and assurance that I felt I could not disagree, and the Card Guard simply nodded in response, as if his word was law.

I simmered, actual steam coming off my body as I tore my eyes away from Kaeden and met Fitzgerald’s gaze once again, only to tighten my grip as Fitzgerald attempted to wrench his hands out of my reach.

“You’re burning me,” Fitzgerald complained.

“You’re irritating me,” I shot back in retort, giving the Rabbit a heavy glare as I turned on my heel to face him, my eyes shaped into a scowl as I turned back to the scene unfolding in front of me, taking in the young, inexperienced Card who spoke to a group comprising of Fitzgerald, a rather uncharacteristically silent Claude, Thomas who almost seemed to dare Claude to make a move, a confused-looking giraffe wearing a pansy covered hat, a young woman named Lavender Blue who had been chosen by the Duchess, and a singular corgi who stood upon two legs and called himself Sir Wallace the 19th.

We were a bit of a ragtag group, but upon further inspecting the courtyard, I came to the conclusion that groups were more likely made depending on where one happened to be standing within the estate at the time that the hunt was determined to begin. This was evident by the fact that though the Duchess and the Caterpillar were likely of equal worth to each other, the Caterpillar was placed nowhere near the Duchess at the time and was instead grouped with a rather odd assortment of people; the majority of the Chiropteran court, an egg with legs, and a singular piglet that seemed somewhat lost. The Duchess, on the other hand, was paired only with Eustace, as others had an odd habit of walking away whenever she grew near to them.

That made things easier for grouping the Duchess, however, as it was decided that the Dim hunt could only be done in pairs, as any more than two people would make things too loud and the Dim would be in danger of finding out about the hunt.

It also conveniently meant that hunters would cover far less ground and there would be more groups to inevitably give up, which was lovely in the sense that it stretched out the hunt and gave me more time before I was imprisoned in the dungeon of Hearts.

I swallowed at the thought as I regarded Fitz again, noting how intensely he paid attention to the rules of the hunt, even though he hardly needed the explanation, as he was the first person I told the lie to. Still.

“If we are lucky, then all will go well, and the two of us will still have the chance to hunt yet, provided that everyone wishes to hunt tomorrow as well,” Fitzgerald murmured, because that was the very nature of things in Wonderland—they were done until someone was bored with them.

The only problem came when things were far too interesting for one to grow bored with, or far too integral for one to forget them. I bit my lip as I scanned the horizon, taking in the faint hint of smoke coming from the corner of the maze that sat on the very edge of the Hearts Estate, the one that sat beyond the barred gates of the wrought iron fencing that protected a garden long since lost in time, one where a woman wandered endlessly yet never found her way back to the present.

For a moment, I almost thought that I was not the only one watching the smoke, but then I noticed something else of interest. “Fitzgerald, where are Manon and William?” I remarked under my breath as I stood

there, scanning the crowds as Fitzgerald stood rather unhappily beside me, looking upon me as if he were insulted by the situation to begin with.

“Well, I suppose not here, if your asking is any indication,” Fitzgerald harrumphed, then tried his best to turn his attention back to the matter at hand, only to find himself interrupted again.

“Yes, but why are they not here?” I pressed, furrowing my brows and shooting another look over my shoulder back at the Cat and the Joker, a question lingering in the back of my gaze. What had the Cat told her?

“Well, I suppose it is because they are in an argument of some kind,” the Rabbit proclaimed, rolling his eyes at me once more as if I were but a pesky little gnat, and that should have done well enough to satisfy my curiosity. “She went to the dungeons after my brother visited her last night,” Fitzgerald sighed after a matter of seconds, only speaking out of the corner of his mouth, trying to be somewhat inconspicuous as he obviously assumed I already knew that Claude went hunting for Manon, not incorrectly. “Manon did not visit her sister as she stated,” Fitzgerald proclaimed, and though he acted like it was a bother to say it, his chest puffed out just a little as if he were proud of himself for having the information, which was telling enough.

“Interesting, considering the fact that Roisin’s head is on the chopping block,” I said under my breath, my mind still lingering on the Hatter and Oliver’s earlier conversation.

“Don’t forget that you are hardly safe either,” Fitzgerald reminded me, his eyes cutting away from me and his grip somewhat loosening as he turned back to listen to the rules. Whatever his thoughts were on the matter, I had a feeling that they were far from pleasant. “Come now, I can hardly wait another second,” Fitz proclaimed, even though the rules had hardly even begun to be read, and they were supposedly of the utmost importance in Wonderland. “We’re hunting,” he said without a second thought as he turned on his heel and stalked away with me in tow, and perhaps it was because he was a king, or maybe it was because people dreaded sitting through long, awfully authoritative things—but others saw and did the same as well, and by the time I looked over my shoulder, a single Card Guard remained in the courtyard all alone, reading from his rules filled scroll as Fitzgerald and I made our way back inside the manor’s walls.

It seemed I would have to find Kaeden later.

A MOST OUTRAGEOUSLY AWFUL THING
HAPPENS (AND ALSO THE CATERPILLAR
BECOMES INJURED, BUT LESS ON THAT)

Within a matter of minutes, I was standing within the Hearts Estate, watching as the increasingly deranged Rabbit seemed to stray further and further from sanity as he quickly paced the same length of floor about eight times, neglecting to inform me of the reason why as I stood there scowling and watching him.

“I think you should know,” I said in disgruntlement, still irate at the injustice of having been tugged along behind Fitzgerald without my consent as the other members of our party took off into the gardens, “that the dim much prefer a dark, hedge filled environment with the occasional bramble, thus making the Heart’s Maze the logical place to go,” I spat. “As it is woodsy and outdoors, where things tend to wander about,” I snapped. “Not a library.”

And definitely not the Hearts Library, if the dim were ever to be a real thing, as the whole library was so brightly lit and perfectly visible from all directions that if such a thing as a dim, an entirely made-up creature that I had invented all on my own, were to exist; it most certainly wouldn’t choose to exist there.

No, because Dim were all mystery and intrigue, they lived for the thrill of the hunt, and the Hearts library? Well, that was nearly the opposite of mysterious and intriguing, unless one were to reconsider the thousands of rounded shelves that reached on forever and find them quite disturbing, which I imagined someone could. Just not me. I was used to the books flying through the air by then, and the row after row of long stretching shelves, I had familiarized myself far too much with them prior to my

visit in Spades, thus resulting in my current situation of being locked in Hearts by the Courts.

Not that I bore the ancient, tortoise librarian ill will, or anything. Nor begrudged the library itself and its indiscreetly placed reserved collection for my dastardly deeds—even though one could have argued that putting a highly classified collection so close to where others were allowed to read was just asking for trouble to present itself. Books were simply collections of paper and ink, they could not be to blame for anyone's less than exemplary actions, for they only contained stories and ideas, once you familiarized yourself with them you were left to choose what was next. A book did not hold your hand and force you to do something.

Or, at least I had not yet met one to do such a thing, but I supposed there was still time remaining for that to happen in the long stretch of time before I returned to England, and I shouldn't have been surprised if such a thing were to happen to me or anyone else.

Very little phased me in Wonderland anymore. Or, at least, very little of my environment in Wonderland phased me anymore—the same could not be said of the inhabitants of Wonderland, Fitz especially, considering the fact that he had charged so determinedly back into the estate even when half of Hearts had decided to embark down the Heart's lawn and seek more logical locations for the dim to be about without having any idea what a Dim actually looked like—he concerned me almost as much as Oliver and Claude, who scarcely, if ever, wandered from the forefront of my mind in those hours.

But when it came to the hunt, I supposed that if that were what was bothering Fitzgerald at the moment, then it may have been perfectly reasonable of him. Especially when one considered the fact that the Rabbit was currently limited in the area he was allowed to hunt by my being bound to the Hearts Estate and the fact that I could not dream of leaving the grounds during my trial, what with the whole popping me back into random rooms like a piece of junk mail that Ava seemed so fond of, but still. It was unlike Fitzgerald to behave illogically, and this was illogical.

Physically, he even seemed to know that, considering the way that he kept twitching his ears while standing at attention as his nose pointed in every direction, like he thought he was being hunted or something of the sort. His very being rebelled against the action of moving away from the crowds, and it was obvious that he was uncomfortable.

So why in god's name had Fitzgerald decided to drag me to the library of all places? And more than that, if he had an actual reason for doing so, then why was he acting so uncomfortable about it all? It was rather off-putting, in my opinion. And annoying, really, as I had devised the dim hunt as a distraction not only for the Crown Court but also for the Kings of Cards as well, most of whom hardly seemed to take it seriously, considering the fact that Claude seemed to be using the hunt as an excuse to mess with Thomas, and Kaeden...

Well, Kaeden didn't believe in the hunt, which was rather nice, really, and would have made him good company—had I had the opportunity to speak to him that day. But instead, there I was, wandering about with Fitzgerald, who, even though he claimed not to be looking for the Dim at that moment, seemed very much like he was hunting when he opened the door to the library and went riffling around, like he thought that the creature would be found residing underneath a stack of books or something.

As if he would find the great mythical Dim in the library. I huffed indignantly at the very thought.

"There are far more pressing things to be concerned about, really," I murmured to myself as thoughts of the White Knight once again floated to the forefront of my mind.

Who on earth would go for the crown? What would they gain, when the people who were entitled to it hardly wanted to bother with the damn thing? And perhaps most pressingly at that moment, though I was fairly certain that it had nothing to do with said crown—why was Fitz currently so concerned with the library?

Everything was much too visible there, what with the large windows and the multitude of stories that all looked down on the large rotunda Fitzgerald and I stood within. The one with the big glistening fountain and all the oil paintings I had been admiring a few months prior. There was no real hunt there, unless one were to search for a Dewey decimal number, in which case it would take months, maybe even years—but surely a Dim would never hide in the Hearts Library. If Fitzgerald had been listening, he would have realized that.

Actually, if Fitzgerald had been fully listening, he might have realized that Dims were never all that real to begin with, and had been made up by me, of all people, to prolong the time to my imminent sentencing. After

all, Kaeden had managed to figure it out, and I suspected Claude had gotten an inkling about them as well. But Fitzgerald?

“They would not be in the library,” I repeated, growing more than slightly agitated with the man as he set about lifting up just about every book sitting upon the tables, undoubtedly disturbing the pages of some very absentminded reader. “A Dim is much larger than a library book and has a long blue tail that makes it impossible to miss,” I insisted, building upon my lie if only to further alarm the man and force him to pay attention to me.

If anything, it got him to set down his pile of books, even if he walked slowly as he looked down the rows of bookshelves before wandering back to me; I counted that as a moderate success. I just needed to work on making it an outright success.

“The Dim is a very... *dim* creature. They’re terribly afraid of books,” I elaborated with a shake of my head. “All the logic and reasoning, the words and the various interpretations—fine literature is something they dread,” I said, though really fine literature was something I dreaded as well, it was much more fun to sit down with a fantasy book and pretend that I was somewhere else. “You’d know if a Dim was here,” I reiterated as Fitzgerald frowned up at the labels that sat on the sides of the shelf, “for they are very tall and very clumsy, with big floppy ears that make it hard to hear, and a long snout sitting between their eyes that causes their vision to be crossed and the idea of depth perception a near laughable one,” I said helpfully. “Though I must warn you, uncoordinated or not, they are prone to biting,” I said, frowning as if it were a rather peculiar trait as Fitzgerald finally seemed to find disgust in the idea of locating a creature that could be so... much, really.

I never got the feeling that he was much for saliva, or bodily fluids, considering the way he once handed me a handkerchief from the tips of his fingers when I stubbed my toe and began to cry. He seemed to prefer to be dry in all ways, and preferably not bitten by anything. But maybe that was just my perception of Fitzgerald, and not true of the real thing.

He was surprising me in many ways that day, after all, considering the fact that he had chosen to show up in his most hated brother’s home, and had possibly held a civil conversation with Kaeden to begin with. Maybe Fitz was not all that he seemed.

Or maybe Fitz had something that he wanted and was desperate to get, considering the way that he looked up and checked what I knew to be a very large golden clock engraved into the wall far behind me. That was very telling of the fact that whatever he was up to, he was on a bit of a time crunch, and it was very likely that he was not supposed to be doing what he was doing.

I raised my eyebrow at the very thought.

“You know, anything you do will get back to him. You are in the home of your little brother,” I informed Fitzgerald, “and these walls hardly keep secrets,” I emphasized, knocking on the side of the doorframe to prove my point as the characters in a portrait near it tried to flee. Nothing went unspoken of in Wonderland, not in the Card Kingdoms, and most certainly not when you were a king, considering the fact that Fitzgerald was there to begin with.

“Yes, well, I will keep that in mind for when we are done,” Fitzgerald said haughtily, shaking his head to himself as he finally relinquished my hand to regard his gloves while speaking to me. He blanched at a green, almost grass-like stain upon the white cotton as he spread his palms out in front of himself, almost as suddenly wrenching them back and holding them to his chest as he silently swore. “He did not agree to give me any time, so I had to steal what I could get and face the consequences later. But if he had been kind enough to agree...” Fitzgerald muttered in complaint, tearing his gloves off his hands to reveal his olive-green digits and then hastily tucking them into a new pair. “Kaeden is in no position to be selfish to begin with, not in this situation, and I still very much have a chance...” Fitz said, as if reassuring himself as he tried to will the green on his hands to fade.

If anything, it grew darker.

“Damn him straight to hell,” Fitz muttered, though I highly doubted he knew much of hell or any religion, considering the fact that it was Wonderland, after all. He must have read it in a book, I mused, perhaps one on England, since I was quickly coming to the conclusion that he seemed a bit obsessed with the country, considering how heavily his city resembled London and all of that. Strange rabbit.

His ears flopped down when he realized that I was watching.

“Goodness, Alice, I know I said that time is of the essence, but give a man some privacy for a second, won’t you?” Fitzgerald said with a frown,

his cheeks burning just as his younger brother's always did, but his flush never reaching his ears. "Just... forget that you saw that," Fitz said as I gawked at his face, ears, and hands. "I am not green," he told me. "Or... if I am green, then that is none of your concern, Alice. People can become green from all matters of things," Fitzgerald told me, fastening the large brass buttons on the back of his gloves before he adjusted his suit jacket, leaning over the edge of the fountain that greeted one when entering the library so that he could check his appearance.

Whatever he saw, he didn't like, and I could see that he was considering removing his gloves once again and patting some water into his cheeks, but as my eyes had gravitated back down to them, he decided against it. Fitz gritted his teeth as he stared at his reflection, obviously not liking what he was seeing.

"I don't suppose you like the color green, do you, Alice?" Fitzgerald asked quietly, and I felt quite guilty for the way that I responded, thinking of my green hued hands and the way that they would darken if I stood around Kaeden and the Duchess's girls for any length of time.

"No," I said, my voice breaking. "Not anymore," I admitted, feeling my stomach dropping not only for me, but for the Rabbit as well as all thoughts of controversy finally left my head.

"Damn," he said as if it were an actual disappointment, and I could see the green beginning to spread more clearly up the pale skin of his forearms then, reassuring me of his certainty of the response I would most likely be giving. "I suppose I have not much to my favor, then," Fitzgerald said as he finally rose from the fountain to face me, regarding me heavily.

I did not respond, for I simply didn't know what to say. Fitzgerald wasn't acting like himself, after all, and it was concerning. His previously demanding, aggressive disposition was gone, and he now acted far smaller in ego, and far less sure of himself. A part of me wondered if he'd always been like that or if I'd missed the occasional change in his behavior sometime in the brief span of a few months that we had known each other.

I felt guilty, looking upon him at close quarters, alone for the first time in what seemed like forever and knowing what he thought of me and, more than that, what he must have been thinking if he were to arrive so abruptly to the Kingdom of Hearts not even twenty-four hours after the Caterpillar had announced the expedition of the date of my trial.

It was strange, because while I did not think that Fitzgerald loved me (at least not in the traditional sense) and while he obviously wasn't aware of that fact (at least not with any obvious sort of tell), I knew that my trial was what was on his mind. More than that, I knew that the news had hurt him.

It was very rare that I considered the fact that while all the Kings were constantly surrounded by people other than myself, those people were not their equals, and Fitzgerald? Fitzgerald was often alone in all regards. I had scarcely seen him with a friend other than the March Hare, and I was not too certain that he counted, really.

I hadn't considered Fitz's social life at all before he was there, standing in front of me and looking as if he were a rabbit caught in a trap, begging for mercy of some sort. I almost wished I had been kinder to him.

Especially at the beginning of his speech.

"You know, news travels extremely fast in Wonderland," Fitzgerald proclaimed with a swallow. "Between talking cats and noisy portraiture, I knew within an hour that your trial was being moved up. More than that, I knew of the day, hour, minute, and second it was to occur. I was at Hearts' door the very hour that Claude made a detour through my palace," Fitzgerald said, causing me to raise an eyebrow at the Cat's antics. "I spoke to the Caterpillar before Kaeden so much as considered it," Fitzgerald said, as if that were a hallmark of his superiority, and not just an example of him invading others' privacy. "I did that because I heard your name, Alice," Fitzgerald said, as if that should have spoken to me, and it did, in a way.

It made my breathing feel shallower and my eyes avert, a prickling of nausea beginning to form at the bottom of my stomach at the realization of how badly it must have scared him, and the fact that if he was this upset, then my chances of success were far slimmer than they should have been.

I tried to watch the windows instead, and look out at the people engaging in the Dim hunt as a reprieve from the very serious conversation that was going on right in front of me, but unfortunately, the majority of the hunters had gone into the gardens, and far too many of them had gone deep into the maze, disappearing from sight. Behind the bulk of them, there was a group of middle-aged men and women wielding their croquet mallets and twirling their cricket bats with Oliver Stamma trailing closely

behind them, the White Knight's eyes momentarily cutting to the library window almost like he knew I was there.

But of course, that was impossible. I had to remind myself of that.

I tried to peek out of the window to see what I could, but aside from a very long black tail occasionally coming up from the maze and plumes of blue smoke, I could not make out very much. I did not know who was even in the maze, which was a concerning thought indeed.

“—Please pay attention, Alice,” Fitzgerald said awkwardly the moment that he realized I was drifting off, his hand hesitantly reaching to touch my shoulder but withdrawing the moment I turned around to look at him, the appendage slowly lowering as if my mere look was too much for him to bear. “I’m trying to speak to you,” Fitzgerald said gently, and because my mind was otherwise preoccupied and I was prone to thoughtless speech; I could only think to say one thing at that moment, the absolute worst thing I could have.

“You remind me of Kaeden when you act like this,” I said shamelessly, but realized it was a mistake the instant I said it as the Rabbit's eyes turned near white and my face flushed a dark red, proving my embarrassment at the flub. I struggled to right it as Fitzgerald went stiff as a board, nearly turning to dust from the shock alone. “I mean... I’m sorry—It’s the mannerisms, the quietness—you’re never shy—” I began, and I would have very much liked to say more, if he wouldn’t have swallowed so loudly or looked at me like his whole body had turned to stone at the moment. Fitzgerald's ears were pointed straight upwards, his eyes were wide, and not a single muscle in his body moved—it was quite unlike him, and he seemed to realize that, but struggled to correct it as well.

For the first time, I was at a loss for words, and Fitz seemed to notice that. After a moment, he cleared his throat and spoke again, hardly able to stand the silence that lingered between us.

“Of course you bring him up,” Fitzgerald mumbled somewhat bitterly. “He is always on your mind, isn’t he? I don’t know why I bother.”

“It’s not your fault. He is not always on my mind, but mostly,” I explained. “It is hard to think of anything else when I am so worried about him at the moment,” I admitted, and with that admission, gained a once over by Fitzgerald, one in which he seemed to consider me deeply.

His eyes traveled the length of my body and mapped my features, obviously looking for something, perhaps any hint of a lie.

He mustn't have found one, considering the way that he stepped towards me almost robotically, his shoulders lifting and his ears somehow becoming even more impossibly straight. It was the whitest I'd ever seen the Rabbit, and for a moment, I was almost sure that the emerald green that previously covered his hands had disappeared. In fact, I was certain of it. I could only see pink on his hands, and though he stared me down while I eyed his wrists, I did not feel a single ounce of bitterness or anger within his stare.

Rather something else, something more tender, more caring, and much more cautious. He seemed to consider every single syllable he said then, and never dared once to look away from me.

"Do you ever think of what could have happened had you given me a chance instead?" Fitzgerald asked, the only part of his body to betray his true interest being the twitch of his nose. "Do you ever think of where you would be, or the life you would have?" He pressed, and I had to consider it for a moment.

"No," I said simply, though a part of me wondered why I said no, and why I had never thought of such things. But then I remembered him, the real Fitzgerald, and the way that he was. I remembered the bitterness I felt upon my arrival, and the frightening realization I'd had one night that I might have wanted to stay in Wonderland.

Perhaps the grudge I'd held against the Rabbit had grown smaller. Perhaps my malice and irritation towards him was rooted solely in Kaeden these days and the way that Fitz treated his brother, but now that I hardly knew up from down with the other man...

The thought made me uneasy.

"You and I have similar needs at the moment, you know," Fitzgerald said slowly as he took in my reaction, obviously finding it to be satisfactory even as my eyes drifted to my fingers and the realization of how strange life had become began to set in.

I had hardly known a Wonderland in which I hated Kaeden Hart. I had hardly known a Wonderland in which people feared my name as they did then. I had hardly known a Wonderland in which a clock tower did not tick in the background and interrupt all of my thoughts.

"More than that, Alice. You and I are capable of being friends. Better friends than we are now, which could be a start to something," Fitzgerald said, his voice all business and his posture changing to something more

formal as I glanced at him quickly and tried my best to consider him as a friend. He could be a fine friend.

But a start to something?

I just as quickly tore my eyes away as Fitzgerald began to dig in his pockets, my mind barely catching on a flurry of motion on the lawn before Fitzgerald was in front of me again, his fingers pinching a small metal band.

My thoughts blanked. The world spun. I could not breathe.

It was not a perfect proposal by far, all things considered. But it was so inherently typical of him, really.

"I know that it is not ideal, Alice, and I am not expecting you to love me, not now or ever," Fitzgerald said very quickly as the rest of the world became a blur around his offering, a very simple golden band, one without a single gem. "But you and I could both benefit from this," Fitzgerald continued, subtly moving the ring a bit closer to my face as I sat captivated by the shaking, golden band. "You would change your name and be free of all of your crimes, and I would finally be the King of Cards," Fitzgerald elaborated, as if I did not know. "It would not only ensure your safety, but help my brothers as well. It would ensure that... *he*... would be free to live his life again, and that Claude and William could be free as well," Fitzgerald explained, his voice almost begging me to consider. "They could be happy, the Crown Court would stop breathing down our necks, and someday, my brothers could fall in love if they wanted to," he said, and I could not help but repeat those words tensely.

"Fall in love if they wanted to," I said, but they must have tasted more bitter on my tongue, because Fitzgerald had said them so sweetly, but then...

"Someday you and I could too," Fitzgerald said as he moved into view, almost blocking the faded scene of the hunt from my mind as he held the ring out to me with both hands and a pleading gaze, his desperation for a yes seeming far too evident at the moment despite the fact that I did my best to look anywhere but at his face. "Alice, it doesn't have to be miserable," Fitzgerald said. "You and I are capable of being happy together, I know we are."

"We are," I agreed, though a part of me doubted it. I knew he would be kind, respectful, and while we might have argued at times... Perhaps we

would have been happy in another life. One in which I was not already wholly ruined.

My chest constricted as I looked away from Fitz's red tinted pupils and allowed myself to look out the window, trying to clear my head so that I could make a rational decision despite the fact that, unfortunately, Fitzgerald was rather ill timed.

A part of me almost wanted to turn to him and tell him that if this was what Kaeden was denying him the pleasure of doing, it was all for a reason.

The reason being that just the night before, I had wanted nothing more than to see him, and Kaeden knew that. All I wanted to do from the moment he left me at my room was forgive, forget, and possibly allow myself to love him again.

But I supposed that, at the end of the day, it was easier to imagine loving someone than to really do it. For if I were to love Kaeden and be with him properly, then the Duchess's girls would need to go away, and it was very likely that if they were to leave then I would be expected to fulfill the roll they had—that of a potential Queen of the unified Kingdom known as Cards.

I was fairly certain I would not like that. I did not want to be the queen of anything, really.

There was, however, always the option to get through the trial and continue loving Kaeden in secret, acting as his mistress and perhaps indulging myself with a tender touch from him every now and again.

I knew that he did not wish to marry, and that to be the King of Cards would be his nightmare as well, so an affair of that variety would have been preferable—but even then, I couldn't stomach that. To hide a relationship was too much, but to engage in one publicly was to have the rest of Wonderland waiting for the day when Kaeden would be the King of Cards.

But, if I married Fitz and stood beside him then it would be the exact opposite situation. I would be seen and I would be heard for the first time in Wonderland. Perhaps I could even make the Duchess bend at the knee for all the trouble she'd caused everyone, and if I closed my eyes and pretended for just a minute and allowed him to speak sweetly to me, to reach for my hands and kiss each knuckle tenderly... I could perhaps pretend Fitzgerald was someone else.

And be a very awful person as a result.

Because if I were to marry Fitzgerald, then I could not pretend that he was someone else. If I were to marry Fitzgerald, I would be a liar.

I had to look him straight in the eyes, take a deep breath, and tell him

—
“—There’s someone bleeding in the courtyard,” I interrupted, the words escaping my mouth the moment that I opened my eyes, unable to look at Fitz and instead cursed to look in another direction, my body going rigid as I was forced to acknowledge something else entirely. Something unignorable.

A gathering of people and a bright splash of red. A familiar red. A red that sat beneath the body of a man whose face I hardly needed to see in order to recognize, not when the guards shoved aside members of the growing crowd to reveal the curled, insect-like torso of the man who laid so close to death. A man who I knew very well to be the Caterpillar, as I had never seen anyone else like him in all of Wonderland, and I highly doubted that there even existed a similar such creature in the country of Cards—though Fitz barely even seemed to realize Erwic was there.

He was too busy trying to stumble through what seemed to be a rather inopportune proposal, unfortunately.

“—That is not a yes or a no—” Fitzgerald began, his tone incredulous as he blinked in confusion, gawking up at me as I seized his ring without a second thought and sprung to my feet. “Alice,” he began, his voice insistent and his brow furrowed, but all I could really note was the creature to the edge of the maze that the Caterpillar had very obviously stumbled out of. “Perhaps you need time to think on it?” Fitzgerald questioned before I grabbed his chin and turned his face, forcing him to acknowledge what I saw.

He froze, his eyes going wide and his breath hitching as they caught on Erwic, unaware that beside him, my eyes had already snapped to the nearest source of motion—

Something unfamiliar and strange, but the obvious perpetrator of such a heinous act.

A very tall creature with a long, luxurious tail. One with lengthy legs and floppy ears, a snout far too long to be of any good use, and round, glossy eyes that peered in every direction as its mouth opened and many

sharp, bright white teeth showed, gleaming so bright it was as if they'd never been used before.

Likely because they hadn't been used before. Likely because up until then, such a creature should have never existed.

And I should have known, as I was the one to invent it to begin with.

Because that strange creature toddling around? The one wandering the dark, uneven paths of the maze, just as I claimed it would be?

"It's a dim," I remarked, and yet I could not believe it myself as I took another futile step towards the window, my hand raising to the glass. "But they are not supposed to be real," I muttered.

"—What do you mean, not supposed to be real?" Fitzgerald questioned, but could hardly breathe before I took off, leaving him to catch up with me; for of only one thing I was absolutely certain...

There was never supposed to be an actual dim to hunt.

THINGS THAT MOST DEFINITELY SHOULD
NOT EXIST AND THEREFORE ARE VERY
CONCERNING TO NOTICE WHEN THEY DO

“Alice, I am going to need you to explain this to me,” Fitzgerald’s voice came sudden and loudly, the man in near hysterics as he tried to catch up to me, his hand gripping desperately onto my sleeve. “What do you mean ‘they are not supposed to be real?’” He pressed, as if I would have any response.

As if I could even think a single thought at that moment! Why, it was madness, really!

“I made it all up,” I said tensely, doing my best to ignore his grip as I continued to walk.

“What do you mean you made it all up?” The Rabbit replied, his eyes going wide as he tried to keep pace, hardly noticing the people that dived out of his way.

“Fitzgerald, please do not make me repeat myself,” I said tightly, leaving the Rabbit rather distraught as he continued to follow me and struggled to keep up with my breakneck speed as my mind continued charging onwards and my feet tried to catch up with my mind.

There were very few facts that I was certain of, but one of them was this; Dims were not real. Dims were never supposed to be real. Dims were supposed to be a distraction to the people of Wonderland, a way for me to slip out of their gaze undetected for just a matter of moments and begin to feel like a human again. They never could have been real, not from the very beginning, not when I had been so careful to refuse to describe them until those final moments in the library, having purposefully skirted such an inconvenience with the knowledge that, if I were to describe the Dim, it would have been all that easier to be proven wrong.

Never once did I consider the very real possibility of being proven right, nor the consequences that would soon follow as I skirted around corners and did my best to fight my way towards the Hearts Estate doors, dodging the influx of people who began to rush through the halls with all manners of shock on their faces, their eyes wide and their breathing uneven as the ones who were closest to the castle escaped the hunt, perhaps fearing that at any moment the Dim would begin stalking them.

Or perhaps they had been ordered to go inside, judging by the way that Card Guards darted every corner and did their best to move people along. They gawked as they saw me run by, and yet not one of them moved to grab me.

Perhaps they thought it would be more of an inconvenience to Fitzgerald, who desperately clung onto me for dear life and begged me to make sense of the situation. “Alice, I’m sure I’m hearing you wrong,” he said, attempting to hold me back to properly speak to me, “if you could just explain yourself, maybe make some sense for five seconds—” He pleaded.

“I am making as much sense as you and your ring are!” I loudly rebutted, my voice high and strained even though it drew attention from the onlookers as Fitzgerald let out an indignant squawk.

Fitzgerald had proposed and yet the details of it, I could barely recall. I could hardly recall anything, really, when my mind was already racing so far ahead of me and made it difficult for me to so much as stop. As a consequence, the Rabbit was left far in my dust and was subsequently just as irritated about it as one might have imagined he’d be the moment that his hand left my sleeve.

Perhaps I should not have embarrassed him in such a way, but I hardly intended to—

“Alice, have you gone absolutely, completely mental?” Fitzgerald called at the top of his lungs, the Rabbit’s voice a near rasp as he refused to give up, forever destined to follow me down a rabbit hole of insanity. He didn’t seem to agree with the concept in the slightest, screaming with everything in him as he charged down the corridors behind me, his voice attempting to bring me to reality. “You are meant to run away from danger, not towards it!” He shrieked, scrambling to stop me and keep me from rushing towards what was very likely a rather unfortunate situation as his hand tried and failed to grab hold of my wrist. The man cursed fervently

under his breath as he nearly stumbled to the ground, the fabric of my skirt just barely escaping him as the knowledge that catching me would have done very little good seemed to settle over him. “If you do decide to keep the ring, I need you to know, this is not behavior befitting the bride of a king!” Fitz called, his face flush with embarrassment.

And yet he did not give up, at least not initially. Perhaps it was my possession of his ring that got him to so blindly follow me, the man pleading desperately as he marched on faithfully behind me, practically shoving people out of the way as he struggled to move through the crowds with the same grace and ease as I did.

“Alice, we can go back to the library, or you could even go back to your rooms alone,” Fitzgerald begged, his voice carrying above the mumble of the crowd as he spoke in that loud, somewhat official way he always seemed to use. “I can get Kaeden if that’s what you want—is that what you want?” He asked hysterically, almost near tears for the fear of it all.

All in all, upon further consideration, Fitzgerald and I were not a very good match.

“I can hardly even think of him at the moment,” I yelled back as I shoved a ram on two legs out of the way, knowing all too well where my mind really was. “There is a man bleeding out on the pavement, and surely I am the one to blame!” I informed Fitzgerald, much to what I imagined was the shock and concern of the other people throughout the halls—though I scarcely cared to look at them.

I had to get to the gardens. I had to know what was going on. I hated being in the dark, or at least I thought I did for a moment, until I heard a pair of flowers with legs murmuring as they passed me by...

“I heard it ripped his whole leg off in just one bite,” a mouse said, and suddenly my limbs felt heavier, and the distance between Fitzgerald and I ceased growing wider. “It is lucky that the Caterpillar has many more to spare,” the Mouse said before squeaking as I shoved it aside, his words doing very little to comfort me.

If Fitz tried, he could have caught me. If he desperately wished it, he would have had me. But it mattered very little if, when I slowed, Fitzgerald did not keep going. Fitzgerald did not so much as consider continuing to chase me, he simply slowed to a near stop and began to give in to the crowd, proceeding to be swallowed by the chaos.

I tried to will him to continue following me as I turned back to him from the end of the hallway, his ring in my hand as I readied myself for him to look at me with dread in his eyes, perhaps going so far as to audibly refuse me... But the look on his face was most certainly not one of a person who had any intention of following me.

It was a solemn sort of sadness that was something quite different from watching a friend wander into death's hands—a very clear unspoken heartbreak that I couldn't understand. Almost as if he'd realized something that he shouldn't about me, about us, about the whole thing—though what it was, I would have liked to know, I got the feeling I would never be informed, nor would I ever have been capable of understanding.

All I could do was turn and stare, the fear in my mind subsiding for a second as, upon realizing he was gone, I had so foolishly looked back.

Fitzgerald's eyes met mine as the crowd began to intensify around us, the sea of animal folk, human folk, and other folk beginning to grow denser, moving him with its waves. The air began to fill with conversation, the guards eyeing the windows and doors as it became clear that something very awful had only just begun to begin.

I pressed down upon the metal within my palm to the point that it began to sting, but whether or not things stung often meant very little in the grand scheme of things. All that did mean anything was Fitzgerald's response, but it never came.

No words left the White Rabbit's mouth as he looked back at me, his shoulders slumped and his sad eyes full of unshed tears.

I almost wanted to encourage him to try to keep up—but the look on his face said he knew he never would.

And at that moment, as the crowds grew denser around me and the stench of fear of all kinds lingered heavily in the air, I tried very hard to understand the Rabbit—and failed.

"Come back here right now," his lips read hopelessly, but I could not. I could only shake my head.

"I'm sorry," I murmured, and I really truly did mean it. I wished he knew that. It was just that around me, the world was moving, and I needed to move as well—I could not sit at the sidelines and wait for all to be well.

I had to take off, and if he could not follow, that was hardly my fault.

I foolishly slid his ring upon my finger for safe keeping, swearing to myself that as he was far more well versed in such things, and more than

that deserved a proper answer given with careful consideration, I would consider his proposal. I would weigh what he had said and contemplate it properly... once I was done charging blindly towards a catastrophe of my own creating, danger be damned.

I had to know what was going on, no matter what it cost me.

A single bump from a cusk in a codpiece was all it took for me to move faster, leaving Fitzgerald far behind as I numbed myself and kept charging onward, doing my best to ignore the disorientation that came as Ava, the Heart's Estate's very soul, did her best to shift and shake the halls to force everyone exiting the Hearts Gardens into an orderly line; not accounting for foolish young women who would go on tumbling through her masterfully created queue.

Only one thought still lingered in my brain, and it wasn't really a thought, but more a careful repetition of the same list over and over again. Red, white, black; those were the colors that made up nearly every day of my life in Wonderland.

But with a slight shift in saturation, or a simple misplacement, those colors turned into something more menacing. It was that fact that kept me moving as I saw large groups of servants wandering deeper into the halls, and spotted nobles peering out the windows at whatever scene unfolded below. Vaguely, I registered the words of the Card Guards around me, "make sure to keep an eye out for the Queen of Hearts, she was last spotted in the gallery three hours ago, and she can't have gone far," one Card Guard mumbled to another as the walls within Hearts moved from a place of fear and dread, to being one of interest and speculation as people strained to see the dark red pool that I had spotted staining the white brick of the Hearts Estate's pavilion, one that so heavily contrasted the various other reds that decorated the structure and yet was still so close to them in nature.

I winced as I heard those bold enough to pause at the window speak, holding onto the sills with a reckless abandon that likely only came from wealth, nobility, and far too nosy roots.

"He's still bleeding," a woman whispered behind her veil as she fought against the tilting floors, and beside her, her companion, a man made out of wood, glimpsed in my direction.

"This never would have happened before she came along," he whispered, just as quickly looking away as he gave in to the whims of the

crowd and began to usher his wife down the tilting halls.

“Alice,” whispered the voices along the walls stinging with accusation. “Alice,” whispered the Card Guards amongst themselves as they thought of what to do next. ‘Alice,’ the estate itself seemed to accuse as painted eyes watched me at every twist and turn.

“Alice,” I replied, noting that the name felt rather odd on my tongue as well as I passed a troupe of troubled nurses, their eyes darting in every direction as a snake with a tall red cap and a loosely slung apron led the way.

I could not help but note that they did not head towards the pavilion. I could not help but note the minute the snake passed one of the paintings by, all the eyes turned its way, an impressive feat as it was a large pointillist painting of a few dozen lobsters dancing the quadrille with a woman in tow.

A lobster dropped the woman in the painting to the ground, yet she barely acknowledged it as a breeze went through the Hearts Estate, forcing me to look back as several women screamed in surprise when it picked up their skirts and cut sharply down a turn in the hallway. The tiles beneath my feet gave a shudder, and the walls of the manor gave a loud groan as a tabby cat perched upon a windowsill gave a yowl so powerful it nearly sent her tumbling past the open glass.

“The flowers! They are turning white!” She said, and I swore I could not breathe, not for the life of me as I stopped dead in my tracks, unable to move another step.

“Something is very, very wrong,” I whispered upon that revelation, slowing my footsteps when I came upon the densest portion of the crowd nearest the second-floor landing, where people crowded the stairs and fought their way towards the windows, desperate to see the tragedy as a few Card Guards looked on. Change was very seldom a good thing in Wonderland anymore.

A Five of Hearts snapped at the Tabby Cat to get away from the window and everyone else to go to their guest rooms, but I did not go. I moved closer towards the banisters and snuck through the crowds, doing my best to ignore the Guards as another guard appeared in the middle of the staircase, yelling at a visitor who had fallen upon the now extraordinarily higher steps.

“The Dims will get you,” the Card Guard snarled at the smallest of a set of Russian Nesting dolls, and immediately the tiny painted figure was snapped up by a larger nesting doll, who just as quickly scurried away from the guard. “That goes for all of you,” the Guard snapped at the people who walked by, and I did my best to stay as far from him as possible as I took the final few steps down to the first-floor landing and tried to make sense of it all.

Because Dims were supposed to be made up. The hunt was supposed to be made up. The danger was supposed to be made up.

And it was all meant to delay my trial for just a matter of days, buying me a small sliver of precious time.

But now it was real. Now the Card Guards were running by me, screaming at each other to lock the doors, the many guests were scurrying in and out of my sight, ducking within the estate walls as what had happened, a most impossible thing, began to set in.

The last I had seen, the Caterpillar was injured. He laid in a pool of blood, the liquid blossoming out quite ironically behind him, almost as if taking the shape of wings, and what must have been a dim... an impossible thing that was made up by me... sat nearest the maze.

“It’s not real,” I remarked, as it felt all too unsettling and all too unrealistic. “No matter what they say, it is not real,” I reassured myself, and yet still I would not look to the windows.

I kept my head down as I made for the final staircase to the main floor landing, passing by two cards in a hurry as I pretended to be anyone else but me. Nothing was ever impossible in Wonderland. I should have taken care to remember that.

As others should have taken care to remember my tendency to blend into crowds. The lovely thing was that when you acted sure of yourself, others rarely thought to bother you. Even overly confident, disaster hardened guards.

“The King says we need to secure Alice. Have a search done of the third floor—” the Jack of Hearts commanded a Two, and for all I would have loved to turn and say, ‘we’ll you’re not doing a good job of securing anything today,’ I could not.

I would not go back to my room. I had to see what was happening with my own two eyes.

I was a far different person than I had been the day before as I fought my way up the corridor against a swarm of Salmon moving hurriedly away from the ornate glass doors that led out to the pavilion as one of them repeatedly scrubbed at a hint of red staining the cuff of his suit jacket, the slightest motion of his arm revealing a thick wrapping of gauze.

Everything was taking too long so I moved hastily and finally found my way into the long, narrow entryway to the Garden of Hearts. Blood mingled with mud on the marble tile floors, and a large, grey creature laid discarded to the side of the entry way, with red, heart tipped spears stabbed clear through its flank and round, dull eyes that watched me as I slowly passed it by, almost devoid of the spark of life.

A single Dim, but surely not the only one.

I faintly registered the voice of the Duchess as I began to push my way nearer and nearer to the door, my mind a flurry of activity as the golden ring joined my thoughts, mingling with the loud screams that floated in from outside, and a barely there remembrance of a stone statue sitting in the center of the maze people had run out of.

“I don’t care who is missing or who is injured, nor do I care whether the Card Guards are hunting for the damn things or otherwise,” the Duchess shrieked as I pushed on by her, the older woman so engaged in argument with a Card Guard that she could hardly care to take note of me. “They are Erwic’s most trusted servants, and he has been kind enough to keep them in his employment since they were but five years of age, offering them a very generous three buttons each week in payment—you simply must take Tweedledum and Tweedledee out of this manor this instant and send them back out so that he might see them, it is death or death for him,” the Duchess said incredulously, gawking as the Card murmured something in disagreement. “Erwic is not only a judge of the highest court in this land but also the eldest at a well-worn eighty something. To suggest that a few nine-year-old girls’ lives are of any sort of equal value to Erwic when knowing who he is?” She harrumphed near hysterically as a sheep sobbing heavily passed me by, her wool similarly mottled with blood. “Send the little brats out! If they die, they die!” She cried, her voice climbing to absurd heights as the two Cards guarding the door looked to each other rather than me, more concerned with pulling faces and silently complaining than doing their job well enough to catch sight of a suspicious looking young woman slipping through the opposite

direction of the crowd. “There is nothing more important than making sure Erwic survives,” the Duchess gave a final squawk. “For if he doesn’t, then who should shall see that justice is handed swiftly to my defamers?” She screamed in irritation, her eyes pinned to the two guards despite the fact that all they could do was gawk at her and do their best to look swiftly away.

If the Card Guards caught the way that I paused, my shoulders lifting and my whole body tensing as yelps and unnatural growls hit the air along with a flurry of action, they did not say anything, nor so much as bother to move as the courtyard entered my view and what seemed to be half of hearts stampeded in front of me, struggling towards the door.

I did not know where to look, nor did I know what to think of it all.

For a moment, I was blinded by the brilliant green of the lawn and the harsh light that bounced upon the pavilion tile—but only for a moment. It did not take my eyes long to adjust, nor to make out the main scenes playing out upon the heart-shaped brick pavilion, along with the desperate sounds of sobbing.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I saw a group of Card Guards struggle to restrain a large, awkward shaped creature, one with far too many teeth to count and an almost foxlike tail. Besides them were others, more cards who seemed to struggle to know what to do as they stared at the entrance to the maze on the Hearts estate lawn with fear in their eyes.

Nearest the door there was a spectacle; the Caterpillar laying upon the cold brick pavement, his hands crossed over his bleeding gut and his insect appendages beginning to curl as he moaned loudly, the crowds surrounding him having parted just enough for a doctor to come in through the gap, and his accompanying assistant to run back and forth holding great spools of what I assumed to be silk to wrap the caterpillar with, considering the fact that the judge was nearly cocooned in the stuff.

The only other person that I could seem to recognize was a nurse, one I’d seen a few times before in a white uniform with a red heart denoting her to be the head of the nine meant to look over the Queen of Hearts on her bad days. She stood just feet from the maze entrance, sobbing her eyes out as she gave the nearest Card Guard some sort of report, the streams of moisture dripping down her face commanding my attention.

“Sue Ellen,” the nurse repeated again and again, “my name is Sue Ellen,” she said, as if that should have been proof enough. “And I am

telling you that the Queen is not inside,” she insisted, continuing to argue with the Card Guard as, not that far away, others began to circle and worry over the state of the Caterpillar. In fact, the Card Guard she spoke to was so bold as to dismiss her, even.

“Nonsense,” he said with a shake of his head. “Impossible,” he said, as if Wonderland were not composed of an assortment of so many impossible and nonsensical things that this alone had to be the one case where the impossible surely was that—not only improbably but wholly incapable of happening. It was maddening and I could hardly stand it.

Not a single Card moved towards the entrance of the maze. Not a single Card chose to believe her. Not a single Card so much as glanced past the entry way of the maze, perhaps fearing they’d find more Dims and what the consequences of that would be.

Leaving me with only one option.

THE MAZE

My eyes closed as I stepped forward and tried to steady myself, telling myself that it would only be the Dims awaiting me within the maze—but somehow that did little to comfort me. So, I decided to tell myself something else; the fact that I was capable of doing this one, single impossible thing.

When I had first arrived in Wonderland, I was not in the habit of believing in impossible things.

To me, the word impossible meant roughly what the dictionary had defined it as; something that was completely and utterly incapable of happening or existing. Something that you knew intrinsically would never be... well, possible. In England, impossible was a definite thing and a near infallible word. One did not throw it around lightly. Especially not those days, when bombs fell from the sky and soldiers landed on beaches. In England, impossible had become a sigh of defeat. It had become a word of the downtrodden and broken, and one that I would hear over and over again.

In England, I chose to believe only one impossible thing; the fact that Reginald Grey was alive and that someday I would see him again.

In Wonderland, however, impossible was only a word. A word often said, but never meant. One that rested on the lips of the Card Guards as they stood scattered across the Hearts' Estate's lawn, uttered again and again with a hint of doubt.

It was a word that spurred me into action and caused me to sprint across the grand expanse of grass, moving faster than the Card Guards could hope to catch me—but it was still only a word. It could not ensure

safe passage as all eyes turned towards me and my name was uttered from accusing lips. It could not even the ground and remove the copious rabbit holes that formed on the lawn as I ran as fast as I possibly could towards the nurse and the Card Guard.

Most of all, it could not will the dying Caterpillar not to see me, his hand reaching out towards me and his face growing paler as his eyes went wide, his lips undoubtedly murmuring out a demand.

I did my best to keep my head up as I ran, my eyes trained forward and my target never changing even as my body screamed in terror as the sudden realization that the dims were likely still in the maze came over me. For a moment, I almost wanted to turn back, but, if what I had heard was right, the Queen of Hearts could very well be in there.

If what I heard was right, all would be too late when it came time to finding her, and it would be my fault for inventing the dims to begin with, for whatever I had done in those few moments of lying for my own interest, I had willed the things into existence. It seemed all too much like something that Claude would say, the fact that merely mentioning something too often could force it to exist—which, in my mind, made it my fault, and my duty to go find the Queen.

I would not have her blood on my hands, nor my imagination.

Two or three Card Guards ran after me as I neared the hedge, but the guard beside the entrance was too stunned to do much of anything, and the nurse looked on in confusion. I told myself that if I was quick enough, neither would come to their senses quickly enough to grab me, and if I were lucky—

“—Alice!” Kaeden called at the top of his lungs, and I winced as I hauled up my legs higher and eyed the deep green of the maze, telling myself that I would make it. I had to make it. I had to be sure that she was not left in there. “Alice, stop, please!” He screamed, the sheer rawness of his voice doing awful things to my lungs and forcing me to try harder, even when all I wanted to do was turn back.

Kaeden would not catch me. Kaeden would not be able to stop me. He would simply have to learn to be grateful when I finally made it into the maze and saved the Queen. He would simply have to rewrite the history of what he thought he knew of the Dim hunt in the back of his mind and tell himself that I had not been lying to begin with.

And that his mother had never been in danger due to my negligence. In fact, she'd been saved due to my bravery and excellent form, because I was someone capable of hearing people out and believing the things they said, especially when I heard a name such as Sue Ellen, which the Queen of Hearts had called so many times before.

I would save her as a result. I had to. I may have mucked up a lot of things, but not this. Not saving her, even as her son ran so close behind me and tried futilely to catch a grasp of me.

"Alice!" Kaeden's voice begged, but I clenched my eyes shut and pumped harder.

I had made it a point to believe more and more impossibles every day, eventually working my way up to believing in four, which seemed a fine enough number although Claude had informed me that Manon had become capable of believing in as many as six impossible things a day by the tender age of eleven, and he himself believed in as many as 1,871, give or take one or two.

That day, I believed in five impossibles, and found myself struggling to recall them all as the distance between the entryway to the maze and my feet grew smaller, and soon only a foot remained. Only twelve little inches, and my feet would pass the entryway, and then...

And then I did not know, and I hadn't had much time to think, because no sooner had I passed through the entryway of the maze than a root slithered across the ground, the tough woody vein lifting itself just in front of my foot before I could push off of it.

I was sent sprawling, landing face first in the dark soil that was still damp with the morning dew. It stuck to my body with a thick, paste like consistency, and I struggled to gain purchase against it long enough to turn around. I just barely caught sight of Kaeden standing at the entrance as I did so, his glasses askew and his eyes wild as he stared at me with his shoulders rising and falling from every breath.

"Alice," Kaeden cried out, pale and clammy, his body shaking, but no sooner had he stepped towards me than the maze got in the way.

Long, dark brambles raised from the ground at the entryway, flicking high into the air, the first one lingering just an inch in front of the hand that Kaeden stretched in my direction, leaving him to gawk at the strange piece of vegetation.

“Ava?” He asked, his voice trembling, and I didn’t know what to think. Not at first. Not as his eyes drifted up to mine and snapped into place, widening impossibly more as he froze, almost seeming to understand the fact that he would not get any further. “Alice,” he beckoned, his voice desperate and his fingers curling in the air as he urged me to walk his way. “Alice, please—” he said, but I could only say one thing in return.

“Kaeden, I’m sorry,” I said, and with my apology the earth gave a mighty rumble.

My breath caught as his fingers tensed, a desperate inhale catching in his throat before something immensely strange happened—branches shot up from the ground, a thick myriad of far too fully grown hedges engulfing the sight of him, leaving only his hand remaining.

The hedge swallowed his hand just an inch then, jerking the outstretched appendage a short distance further from me.

“—Your highness—” A voice exclaimed on the other side of the hedge a split second later, the Card Guards having obviously found their way to their King and trying to help him, only to find that, despite their efforts, Kaeden kept reaching.

“Alice, take my hand—”

“--Your highness!” The Card Guard shrieked in disagreement as the ground gave another rumble.

Another crack. Another inch. “Alice, you need to get out of there—”

I did not move. I scarcely even breathed.

And then another, a chorus of yells barely registering in the back of my mind.

“Alice, please, just listen to me—”

Commotion. The rustling of leaves. I could hear the Card Guards come running.

“Pull him out, pull him out, pull him out—” A voice began to demand, the Jack of Hearts, I believed— I saw his hand retreat another inch, scarcely able to process what was going on.

“—Kaeden—” It was Claude’s voice that came next, though it was sharp and concerned in a way I’d never heard him speak before, the musical quality leaving. “Kaeden, let go—”

What was happening? What was going on? I stared at the greenery of the shrub, unable to understand it all as Kaeden let out one last plea—

“Alice, you need to leave the maze now—” Kaeden called, but his voice was cut off.

The air was thick in my lungs as the last sound that came from the other side of the thickening hedge was a final, sickening crack. One that sounded dull and hollow, and turned Kaeden’s fingers limp.

And then, just like that, his hand began to sink back into the hedge as I gawked, almost as if it had been sucked back through the wall and spat out. A single inch became two, then three, and the slow sink of Kaeden’s arm back into the maze ended rather quickly, a small hole remaining in the brambles where he had once reached for me for only a second as, at the edges of a bramble, a single bud formed.

A single white bud that blossomed mere seconds later, opening up to block the hole in the maze just a split second after a single, bright green eye looked frantically through it.

I gawked, because for a moment, that was all I could do. For a moment, I could barely understand it, and for a moment, I could only vaguely process the fact that I would have to add to my assertion of five impossibles and replace it with six, for the idea of the Hearts Estate helping me in any regard seemed to be yet another strangely impossible thing.

And for the estate to do it in such a way that could have hurt Kaeden?

“Thank you, Ava?” I muttered in near terror as the thick rose walls rustled in response, further unsettling me to the point that I decided it was best to rise to my feet and get my bearings, a shiver running through my body as I rose unsteadily. Looking around was still not that much help, however, as looking at the hedges of the maze was almost as disturbing as what I had seen moments before, and I swallowed as I looked around me at the white roses that dripped red pigment from their petals.

“A very interesting new look, Ava,” I said tensely as I gritted my teeth and looked to either side of me for a pathway, my brows furrowing in distress as I noted that the Hearts’ labyrinth managed to look somewhat more confusing than usual. “I... do hope that Kaeden is alright,” I said wearily, feeling rather sick at that moment. “Please be alright,” I winced, my hands clenching tightly at the thought of his hand retreating through the wall of the maze.

I had never fully knew what to think of the living labyrinth on the Hearts Estate grounds before, teetering on a sort of unease towards the

location after what I had seen of my father in the center of the maze so many months prior. The show I had just witnessed did not help with that, and now I could not help but regard it as a somewhat eerie place to be, one that I wished to get out of as soon as possible.

Not that it ever looked normal or even somewhat navigable, considering the fact that the pathways within the maze had always changed near constantly, and outside of the Hart family, no one ever seemed to have any idea how to navigate it, but still. Ava was a bit concerning, wasn't she?

Stiffening as I spotted what seemed to be a pathway opening up and noting that the hedges of the maze seemed to be getting somewhat taller than they had been before, I made a choice; largely because of the declining availability of light.

"I apologize profusely, Ava," I said as I gritted my teeth and reached for the smoother length of a stem making up the hedge wall, wincing as I still managed to catch a thorn or two in my attempts to struggle the stem out from the hedge. The last thing I wanted to do was upset the estate after... that. "Unfortunately, I have reason to believe there's a bit of trouble in here, and I should not like to go unarmed," I mumbled, wincing in expectation as I snapped a sizeable length of stem off from the walls and expected some sort of retaliation. There was always some sort of retaliation, especially for broken things.

But none came, almost as if Ava wanted me to do it, though if she thought I needed to have some sort of defensive weapon, she likely could have conjured one up herself, seeing as how that was what home would do—I frowned at the thought and squinted at the hedges surrounding me.

The hedges had rustled, hadn't they? The archway had closed itself, hadn't it? Surely Ava was there. She had to be. It was the Hearts Estate, after all.

Even if it felt rather unfamiliar at the moment, what with the empty, towering hedge walls and the strange ticking that had only just begun to cling to the air, forcing me to blink in surprise.

"Strange," I said as I stepped away from the walls with the stem in hand, though I supposed I shouldn't have said such a thing, considering the fact that in all ways, most things in Wonderland could be considered somewhat strange. "Claude can believe in as many as 1,871 impossible things a day," I reminded myself, knowing that nearly all of those

impossible things were very likely possible, and therefore at least 1,871 impossible things happened in Wonderland every day.

Ava acting oddly could be one of those, for all I knew, and I listed it as number two of the six impossible things that I had chosen to believe that day, the first one still being, as it always was these days, the fact that there was a Wonderland and I, Alice Grey, was inside of it.

And that said Wonderland was currently being overtaken by a loud, rather intrusive ticking noise, like that of a great, large clock. One that made me feel a little sick, to be honest.

“Number three,” I told myself as I raised the stem above my shoulder and rounded the corner into a new pathway of the maze, noting the growing walls around me. “Cats can disappear and reappear at will,” I said, thinking of Claude and wishing he would decide to pop next to me right then and there. When he didn’t, I made an addendum, eyeing the space beside me with the tiniest sliver of hope, “as can completely self-absorbed, freckled prats.”

No dice, no Thomas. I took a deep breath. The one time in my life that I would have very well liked to see him, and he was not there.

“Perhaps I should have stayed with Kaeden,” I remarked, my mind cutting back to him and my throat tightening again as I thought of the cracking sound. “He is alright, isn’t he, Ava?” I asked, looking to the bushes around me.

Only a breeze responded.

My hands tightened on my makeshift weapon as I drifted down the pathway, seeing no other twists or turns to make as I held my breath and let my eyes drift upwards, noting how the branches slowly began to spread and arch into each other, blocking out more of the light. “Ava?” I said again softly, my fingers wrapped so harshly around the stem that I was very sure it would break.

Vaguely, in the back of my mind, I remembered a story my mother had told me about a girl that she had grown up with and how she had died from infection upon stealing a neighbor’s roses, a scratch from one of the thorns growing infected and eventually killing her. It would be quite a ridiculously mundane and yet ridiculously rare way to go, but then again...

“Don’t think about that,” I told myself as I closed my eyes and made my way down the long, stretching pathway. “Think of real impossible things, not surely possible ones,” I said, clenching my eyes shut as I took

another tentative step forward, ignoring the tremble in my legs as a soft crack sounded from within the bushes. “Impossible thing number four,” I said, and hated that the item had slowly made its way down to four on my list of impossible things, because that meant that I had to believe other impossible things before it. It had once been so important to me that the thought stung. “I will see my father again,” I said, and remembered with a pang the fact that his statue sat within that very maze, and that for all that I loved him and wanted him back, I had not gone to see it once since the day Kaeden had revealed it to me; my father’s final resting place.

I had frequently visited my father’s grave in Oxford, hoping that one day I would simply walk up and see him standing there, but now? I had seen him only once.

Guilt settled in my stomach at that realization. I was genuinely sorry for such neglect, yet I struggled whenever I remembered the brief glimpse I had gotten of his features. My father did not feel like Reginald Grey anymore—not after I had learned so much and so little about him in Wonderland, the content of which left me forced to wonder what he was doing with a man like Cornelius Thames in the first place.

“But it does not matter if I do not know who you are, father,” I said, raising my head a little higher. “For I know who I am, and I am not the type to back down.” Even when things were terrifying and awful.

And death, or at least mutilation, seemed all too likely.

The low call of a lost bird sounded amongst the brambles and I tried to think of other things.

“Impossible thing number five,” I said, taking a large breath and steadying myself while telling myself that there was nothing to be afraid of within those brambles, just a lost woman wandering amongst the vegetation in confusion. “The Queen of Hearts is within this maze, and she is most desperately lost and in need of rescue,” I told myself, having decided to be her rescuer and to bring her back home to her son, even though I did not know where she could be or how I would find her. “Impossible thing number six, Ava controls this maze, and she will most certainly help me,” I told myself, raising my stem high above my shoulder as I heard a rumble in the distance, one low and airy, as if breathed out by a creature of some sort.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of white and red, and told myself that it was only a card. It had to be a card. Even if a sick feeling in

the bottom of my stomach told me that it wasn't.

I quickly added on a seventh impossible thing, though I wasn't sure if I truly believed in it, I just wanted it to be true. "Impossible thing number seven, the idea of one beating a monster with something as flimsy as a stem from a rosebush is not a wholly ridiculous thing," I said, and genuinely wanted it to be true.

It would be a true kindness if that one small thing could be true.

It would be a true kindness if, after failing to kill the Jabberwock and nearly costing Claude his life, breaking into Kaeden's castle and potentially leaving his heart broken in two, failing to reunite Manon with her sister and costing Roisin her freedom, disappointing Fitzgerald and not falling in love with the only person who had ever actually wanted the crown, and genuinely distressing William in just about a thousand ways; it would be nice if, after all of that, I could do just one thing right.

If I could save one person and actually make their life better.

The idea seemed laughable as I thought of it, and the notion that I had rushed in blindly without a thought hit me, causing my chest to tighten and my eyes to close. The last time I had done such a thing and made such large, heroic promises, I had nearly gotten myself killed in the Deadwood Forest. I didn't know why I thought it would be any different.

I didn't know why I thought that anything would be any different half the time, as it seemed I went around Wonderland causing trouble and doing nothing but getting in too far over my own head.

"I should have stayed back with Kaeden," I finally admitted to myself, willing to give in to the fact that, as I had long suspected and never wished to acknowledge, something in me had broken that day in the Deadwood Forest. Some part of me was no longer the same.

Some part of me was afraid of the clock I heard in the distance, and wondered if I were the only one who could hear it, and if the path that stretched in front of me led nowhere. The urge to cry was overwhelming.

But then, just when I had nearly given up and the bitterness of tears bit at the corners of my eyes, I decided to open them again, and there she was.

The Queen of Hearts, standing at the end of the long pathway I had wandered down, everything about her still looking pristine and perfect—like a dream, really, and I moved towards her without thinking, every step feeling lighter.

So much lighter that I could barely make the distinction when my heels no longer dug into grass but instead clipped against stone. Really, I almost couldn't believe the fact that it was her.

I had seen her more than a handful of times before, but even then, I had hardly, if ever, interacted with her, and I had never looked at her properly. She seemed far more... present than she should have.

I had never noted the smoothness of her shiny black hair, or the darkness of her pretty kohl donning eyes. I had never taken note of the far more mature way that she lined her lips, forming a heart with her dark red lipstick just as Roisin did, but doing so so perfectly that it almost fully confirmed the girl's technique as being an imitation of the real thing, the pretty red heart upon the Queen's lips making her cupid's bow far more prominent and her bottom lip seem just a little fuller. Her clothing, too, was beautiful, just as she was. Even in a state of disarray, it was far finer than anything I had ever worn, and perhaps one of the most magnificent combinations of silk and velvet that I would ever see in my natural born life. Perhaps she was paler than I recalled, with lips far redder, but—

She was gorgeous, one of the most perfect things I had ever had the honor of seeing, and for a moment I was struck by the fact that, in face of all of her beauty, Kaeden had thought for even a moment to look at me, when his mother had obviously set the bar for excellence.

And then she saw me and the way that I beamed, my heart picking up at the very sight of her, and I could not help but think that she also happened to look just a bit like Kaeden. Not as tall or anything, but there was a roundness to her features and a prominence to her cheeks that made her still look young, even as her mouth fell and her eyes landed on me, the light playing upon her white painted skin in a way that almost seemed to make her glisten as I beamed at her, satisfaction settling in my bones even as the Queen of Heart's stared at me, only giving her head the slightest of tilts.

My mouth opened, and then it hit me that I did not, for the life of me, know the woman's name. I had never even thought to ask. I simply only knew her as the Queen of Hearts. I searched my mind for the answer, my eyes drifting down to my feet, and found myself no longer standing on the grass nor anything resembling the Heart's Pavilion, but on another stone fixture I had not walked on for roughly six months.

Six months in which I'd tried to find out what had happened to my father.

My mind went blank as my eyes tore back up to the Queen of Hearts, only to find that she was not standing in front of me at all, but rather the stone statue of a woman in a dress was there in her stead, one of the many that stood in the courtyard. One of the many who was trapped in time, her clock stopped by some unknown entity.

All of their clocks stopped by an unknown entity. And yet, a loud ticking still sounded in the background, filling my ears even as a harsh, sharp pain akin to that of a rock made contact with the base of my skull and put an end to my wondering, causing me to crumble. My body folded under me as only one thought remained:

How strangely inconvenient.

THE DEATH OF REGINALD GREY

The world went dark for only a moment as my body resonated with something as abrupt and final as the hourly chiming of a clock; the sound alone making my mouth dry and my head ache—but the minute my eyes did open, I looked up, even though I could not tell if it had been minutes, seconds, or even days since I had fell.

I always looked up.

Every time I fell, no matter how it happened or why, I always looked up, whether it was during the fall or after it.

I didn't know if it was a learned behavior, or a naturally occurring one. All I knew was that it had suited me well and had given me one final glimpse at the grey, dreary skies of England and Gilbert Glenshire as he reached for me with his ring in his hand, the very same ring that had pretty much plopped into my lap upon me landing rather suddenly in the world known as Wonderland—ever since then, I knew to look.

I'd lost the ring, of course, I was always dreadfully inadequate when it came to keeping track of trinkets and other small things, and I was sure that it had vanished something like a month in after I had taken it off and left it on my bedside table so that I could go fiddle around with the clockwork quite hopelessly—but the ring was just a thing regardless, and I had kept another far more important trinket from the whole falling down a rabbit hole mess, which was, again, the whole looking up lesson, which all things considered, was quite useful when it came down to it.

It always infuriated me that in books, people would simply get yanked backwards and tossed about without a second thought, never so much as bothering to look up and see who the prick was that did it. Men always

assumed women to be so docile and compliant; but I did not feel that way once I opened my eyes again. I did not feel like letting things happen to me. I wanted to fight, and I wanted to know exactly who I would be fighting with.

Yes, things did go black for a moment there, but I was as determined as I'd ever been, and I opened my eyes but a mere two seconds later, having fought to remain conscious with my teeth and nails solely to see what the hell it was that dared to treat me so painfully flippantly. My eyes snapped open with dreadful force, and though I was disorientated, I could see clear enough. The only problem was the sight that greeted me when I opened my eyes...

Nothing. Absolutely nothing greeted me. That was the problem. Immediately, I let out a hiss of irritation, my eyes scanning the horizon to search for my captor— only to find that all that stood there were statues frozen in time.

I realized with a jolt that just beneath me, the bricks were laid to form a large hour hand, and the paved clearing I had entered formed a clock. Perhaps the most disturbing thing it could have done.

It almost seemed like the universe was playing some grand prank on me, because looking at the white roses and the brick patio devoid of the Queen of Hearts, it all seemed to be much too unlike Ava or the actions of any House that I'd known thus far—someone had to be at fault. The only question was, who?

I scrunched my nose in confusion, squinting down the pathway for only a single second before my attention was torn elsewhere.

“Ow!” I yelped, jolting up and jerking my head in the other direction as a sharp pain came under my ribs, almost as if someone had hit me. What on earth— “Ack!” I hissed, my eyes going wide and my head darting to look in either direction as another round of sharp pain greeted me, the source of which was unidentifiable, and though there was a clear path both in front and behind me, I could not find a creature of any sort standing upon it. Immediately, I let out a furious shriek in retaliation, whipping my head back and forth to search for the culprit. “Hello?” I called, not an ounce of kindness in my voice.

All that responded was the rustling of the roses.

My eyes narrowed and my brow furrowed as I turned to look ahead of me again, straining to see who could be the culprit as I listened closely.

Not a single sound was heard, the statues that surrounded me did not move a single muscle, forever frozen in time.

Thirteen of them stood in that pavilion, each having long since turned to stone, and a part of me could not help but wonder if they'd been lured to that place in the same way as I had been. The thought sent shivers down my spine.

I wrinkled my nose, not daring to move any other muscles as I sat there, staring towards where the hedges seemed to heal themselves, knitting back together and taking away the only exit. It seemed Ava was not in control of the maze anymore; in retrospect, she probably hadn't been since I first walked in.

"Strange," I said, and I made no moves to continue forward, nor to go back. Even if I were to try to leave, only one indicator for direction remained; a simple signpost that was overwhelmed with carved wooden plaques, each pointing in every which direction. *This way, that way, no way, bad way, right way, wrong way*—The directions went on and on, leaving me far too confident that there was no possibility of me choosing the proper direction and finding my way out. I could scarcely even imagine walking through the harsh thickets to begin with.

I was lost, and the funny thing about being lost in Wonderland was that, though it might have been a very good thing when one did not wish to be found, it was a near fact within the land that the less of a clue one had as to where they were at any given moment or time, the less of a chance they would have to be found. And as I could only define my current location with one word...

I frowned as I tried to push off of my forearm and rise to my feet, disgruntled to find myself shoved back down only a moment later, prompting another hiss of irritation out of me as I once again whirled backwards and looked for the source of such a disturbance, only to find nothing but thin air and the statues surrounding me—my father's likely sitting not that far away.

I tensed, a strange tightness forming in my chest as I stared into the emptiness, finding that there were still no signs of anyone to perform such actions.

I should have been alone, all alone, and yet...

A snap sounded from just behind me, and I whirled to face it, my lips parting and a sinking feeling beginning to fill my stomach. "Kaeden?" I

asked fruitlessly, holding myself as I sat there and willing him into existence. "Sometimes, when you want something an awful lot, it will come to you," I murmured, mimicking Claude. "I'd love for anyone to find me," I said, but my words died on an empty pavilion, having not so much as neared the trees before they were swallowed up.

I closed my eyes, then opened them again, hoping that the mere act of blinking would bring someone to me, only to be disappointed.

There was nothing yet again. I didn't know why I bothered to turn at all, honestly, and though I stared at the air beside me with a disheartened stare, it did not prompt any being to suddenly come into existence. At least, not at first.

It was only when I began to look away and set to the task of finding my way out again that any sort of reaction was given to me. No sooner had I begun to turn my head than it happened. Quietly and very briefly, the slightest sound hitting the air after another barely audible crack tore my attention back to the same spot again.

The sound of a child's laughter. Giggles akin to the young boys who used to play near the creek just down the street from my family home, the ones who I had to chase off once for flinging mud and ruining Mary's newly sewn Sunday best dress when we were but children.

The sound was almost exactly the same, and it was so familiar that I could not help but stare, my eyes going wide and my pulse quickening as I stared at the space in the brambles where the boys could very well be...

"But that's nonsense," I whispered, not so much as daring to blink, "because Matthew Derring died in the war the second year he was deployed, and Alec Westerson has not laughed in ages," I said, because I knew that. I knew all of that for a fact. "Moreover," I said, my confusion rising and the concern I felt ticking upwards with it, "Alec Westerson is near twenty-five now, and he would not laugh like a child anymore," I said, as if logic and reason mattered in any sort of place in Wonderland, when I very well knew that it didn't.

Another loud tick sounded, causing me to flinch as my head practically split in two, a part of me almost feeling like I was being punished for trying to regard things with any sensibility. A part of me almost felt like I should have known I would suffer for such a thing.

Nothing mattered very much in the land of Wonderland, except for time and the constant ticking of a large clock tower in the distance, as well

as the Crown Court and the King of Cards, as well as friends and other things—but aside from the definiteness of the people, places, and things that you knew to most certainly be real, you could scarcely trust anything else.

I could scarcely trust even myself, and especially not my perception of things, which was why I tried to rise back up to standing again, finding the world to be spinning and a flash of a distant memory filling my mind once again.

This time of my mother, and the face she made when I presented the booties I'd knitted to gift an old school friend upon the announcement of her baby's arrival, my mother's amusement and disapproval showing in the cock of her brow and the way she held the knitted garment limply beside her, shooting me a lopsided grin that almost seemed to ask what exactly it was I thought I was doing. "Alice, you simply can't present this to her," my mother laughed, her voice as light and airy as if she were right beside me, but I knew that she was not.

For a moment, it seemed so real, like I was back in the foyer at my parents' once again, and my mother was standing right in front of me. But just as soon as it came, it vanished, having brought about only the faintest of memories. My mother would never be in Wonderland.

"Something is wrong," I said, as if that were not a clear and obvious thing that I had known to be true at that point, or that something was not nearly always wrong within Wonderland. It was just this seemed to be something that was wrong...er. Remarkably wrong, if you asked me, because everything seemed so familiar and unfamiliar all at the same time, and though I was very certain that I was alone, I could have almost sworn that I'd heard a faint hum of a voice behind me.

"I did not think the cookies were poison..." Murmured Kaeden slowly, his voice somewhat unfamiliar as it was not quite as rich and warm as I knew it to be. "But thank you for your concern," he added after a moment, though why he was stating such a thing, I could scarcely recall, and when I turned back to look at him, I found that he was not there. He was not there at all.

"Kaeden?" I whispered, my eyes going wide as I stared back down the pathway, my senses on high alert for the moment when another such memory, so vivid and real, occurred.

It came in the form of Claude's voice, so rich and deep that it was just as stunning as when he had said it the first time, and I could see his face so clearly then in the back of my mind, the strange gentle smile that overcame him and the softness of his eyes was almost as real then as it was when he stood right in front of me. "I should like to be friends as well, Alice," he purred, and it must have been just about six months prior that he'd said such a thing, give or take a few days, for though the words felt so familiar and I had not been in Wonderland all that long when they were said, a part of me felt as if I had already known Claude more than a lifetime by now, and that any time before we were friends... well, that was something distant and odd, wasn't it?

"Something is most definitely wrong," I whispered, though I could not fully explain what, or how. Just that there was something not right about it all, and that... and that...

And that I nearly fell as I stood, wincing as I braced myself on the side of a hedge and felt it come over me. A strange sensation, one almost as if my whole being— my body, my soul, and all that was left of me—was spinning strangely counterclockwise in some sort of way, and that there was little I could do to stop it.

But that was such an odd thing to think or say, and I felt myself slowly growing more and more disorientated with it as I considered that fact. Surely, I could not be spinning in any direction, not then, not when I was staying still. But maybe the world was moving beneath my feet... Though that wasn't quite the right explanation either, because even if the world did seem to spin beneath my feet, I doubted it would feel as if every word that I had ever said would be spinning around me as well. That was far too disorientating and strange, and surely a too impossible thing to occur.

Impossible, like... "I will see my father again," I repeated, spinning on my heel to find him, only to be forced to confront the frozen, stone face of the man. "Alive," I added with a hint of fear as I subconsciously took a step towards him, my eyes dancing up and down his frame.

I never brought myself to look at him when I visited him; I only went once, and then never again. But there he was, just as I thought he'd be; a teacup in his hand and the same tired, aged look in his eyes. His stubble present on his chin just like it always was when mother was away, and the bags present under his eyes just as they were after a long day of working. A sort of resignation sat in his expression, almost like he expected it all.

He looked so old then, but also so young. Both like the father I remembered, and like a stranger at the same time.

I could not help the way that I stumbled towards him, desperate for some sort of comfort, even as the sight of him like that tore me apart.

Struggling, I tried to hold onto the sight of him and not fade into the past, but the moment I began to walk towards him, I felt myself slipping.

Flashes of Kaeden sitting me down on a bed in a faraway kingdom filled my mind, the worry showing heavily on his features, but fading the moment that he sat me down, inspecting me anxiously. I remembered his lips pressing against my clothed thigh intimately, and the way that he looked up at me with a sigh of relief, a smile playing upon his lips. He said something, something I could barely understand, before standing and kissing the edge of my hairline. "I was worried about you," he breathed, completely unaware that, in the current moment, I was likely in far more trouble than I had been ever before.

I came back to reality with a stumble, catching myself on the pavement and immediately pushing myself back up, my every single breath labored and uneven as I trained my eyes on my father. "Do not think of the past," I willed myself, even as my body seemed to practically ring with every single tick of some unseen clock. "Do not get lost," I said, but a mere second later, I was lost again.

"No, no, you mustn't do it like that," Fitzgerald insisted from within a heavy fog, his sleeves pulled back and dark oil staining his forearms as he pushed me aside and properly wound the cog I was working on. "You must be extra careful with clockwork, for messing with it effects time itself," he told me, and I realized with a jolt what was wrong.

"Clock," I said as I jerked back into consciousness in the courtyard, deciding that that was the source of it all. "Is somebody messing with the clock tower?" I asked, and yet, even then, such an assertion didn't feel right as the voices echoed in and out of my head alone, and what I was experiencing was less of a physical reaction and more of an internal one. "My clock," I said, as if I had ever owned such a thing in my life, and I could have almost scoffed at the very idea—

And then my father was there, standing right in front of me, but still made of rigid, unforgiving stone. A reminder of what could happen in Wonderland.

“My clock,” I repeated slowly, a strange familiarity filling me as my hand raised up to my chest and I felt it, a odd tick tock. “My clock,” I repeated, because very often you are prone to repeat yourself when bad things happen, and I felt another, even more disorientating wave of nausea as I set about holding my chest, clutching my hand tightly over it, as if there really were a clock in there, and I should like to keep it.

My hand fell on my father’s shoulder as I tried to steady myself, using his solid form to support me, but this turned out to be a mistake, as just touching him sent me down the rabbit hole again and a verified wave of memories hit me.

Claude stood behind me, his smile wide as he looked at me and held my waist, beaming at a dress Home had created. “You know, happiness really does suit you—” he said, only to just as suddenly cut away.

“Give those back,” Kaeden cried with a laugh, struggling to pull his glasses from my hands as I held them high above my head—

“—All of the Cards, Alice,” the Caterpillar said gravely, but no sooner had he blown his smoke than the scene changed again.

“You promised!” My mother screamed in the middle of the night, her voice high and shrill as Mary and I sat at the top of the stairs, fear in our eyes as our parents argued only for me to, just moments later, be yanked out of the memory and plopped into a new one.

A new, rather painful one.

“Tell me again about Wonderland,” I demanded, my hands reaching up towards my father as I laid in his lap, only six years old but determined to know more. “Tell me about the Cats and Cards again,” I beckoned, placing my hand upon the side of his face—

“—I don’t want to play this game anymore,” I snapped, hardly able to keep myself up as I scanned the courtyard, finding no one in sight, but still sinking all the same as bitter tears stung at the corners of my eyes.

I just had to stay awake. Someone had to find me. I had to believe I was going to be okay—

And then I heard it. The sound that changed everything as my hand slid down my father’s statue, still grasping desperately for purchase.

There was a grinding sound; one of minerals on minerals. One that became far too loud as my hand slid down my father’s frame and landed on something loose, something that had long since been broken off.

I had scarcely the time to fall to the ground before I realized it, the fingers once resting upon his pocket now sitting within my hand. Everything went white, a sob caught in my throat, and I dared to look up.

I dared to look up and watch him crack, over and over again, all of the pieces that had been hastily stacked back together falling apart with a clatter, the cracks in my father showing and widening until not a single, whole piece of him remained.

And what could I do but watch?

What could I do but stare in abject horror, my fear halting any reaction I could have had, as I stood there and watched everything I'd worked for fall apart, with not a single person to blame but myself.

I couldn't even cry.

A MOST UNFUNNY JOKE

The strange thing was, though, it seemed natural for time to start as suddenly as it stopped—it rarely, if ever, did.

I had been lucky until then, indulging in a world where the horrible, tragic moments did not last all that long, and while there was fear and anger, it always faded somewhat quickly. I had not lived in a world where I was forced to come to terms with reality in any sort of drawn-out way. I had not lived in a world where I was forced to sit amongst the dust and rubble of Reginald Grey and watch as the wind callously began to blow him away, forced to sit there for hours until my mind and body were numb, my mind unable to find any escape even as the pathways of the maze once again began to open up, and the air filled with shouts of my name.

I could not so much as speak.

The most I could do was crawl away once the smaller pieces had shattered and only the larger bits of stone remained, my eyes still lingering upon what little remained of my father but my body taking shelter under a tree—the same tree, if I remembered right, that once held a door to another world. A door which currently poked me in the back as I pulled my knees in close to myself and waited, only the sound of my breath remaining as the clattering of rocks sounded in the distance.

I watched as the roses turned back to red. I watched as the sky turned amber, and the clouds hung low, the sun disappearing beyond the horizon. I listened as the calls grew louder, more frantic, and more numerous.

But I did not speak, because sometimes, one simply could not.

And... perhaps I did not want to speak. Perhaps I did not want to be found. The courtyard seemed to be the only place within the maze that Ava

did not control, and as the estate did not know where I was, I was content to stay there until the end of time, burrowing my face into my knees and wishing desperately to go home—Then having the most dreadful realization that I did not know where my home was at all.

What was the point of returning to Oxford if after I had fallen down the rabbit hole, I came out a completely different person? One who had seen horrible things? One who thought and acted differently?

Alice Grey resided there, in Oxford; they were waiting for Alice Grey to return there; but what if the Alice Grey who came back simply wasn't the same? What if somewhere along the line, something within me had changed too much, and this had sealed it?

What if, upon my return, no time had passed at all, and my mother and sister still smiled excitedly at me? What if Gilbert Glenshire still waited for me, unaware that I had lost the ring, along with any hint of fight I had left in me? What if Peter still looked at me with that hint of pity in his eyes, always thinking me to be a foolish girl with a childish crush who he could only tolerate out of respect for her father?

What if, my mother, knowing the argument it would cause in the old days, always left up the photos of my father, and I had to look at him every day knowing now for sure that he had passed, and that for all of those years I was holding onto nothing?

But what if I stayed in Wonderland? Knowing that I would be in danger for the rest of my life and that, through my foolish, headstrong ways, I had both damned myself and those I cared about to misery? What if I had to sit there and watch as head after head was chopped due to my mistake in not killing the Jabberwock, only to watch him be put to death? What if I had to bend to the Duchess over and over again until I didn't recognize myself?

More than that... What if my clock was broken?

My hand rose to my chest at the thought, my every breath growing labored as I looked around me and saw the statues that stood there. What if someday my clock stopped too? What if someday I found out what happened behind those stone eyes?

What if I knew what it was to be Reginald Grey?

It was with that thought that my tears began; the droplets falling to the ground and pooling somewhat immediately against the pavement. "I don't know what I'm meant to do anymore," I whispered, and over and over

again. Tears fell from my eyes, lingering on the pavement beneath me almost as if to mock me.

I would cry an ocean of tears, wouldn't I? I could see it then, the water escaping my face and falling on the ground, soon flooding the maze and causing everyone to have to swim for safety. I would be a verified tsunami, wouldn't I?

The thought made me throw back my head in an attempt to get it all to stop, a solid gulp emitting as I shut my eyes and willed it all to go away—only to open my eyes a second later with a jolt.

“—We simply must stop meeting like this—”

I don't know why I believed for even a second that he would not be there, for he always seemed to appear like that, and just as it had the first time, my fist went swinging—

Only to collide with wood the moment that Thomas stepped out of the way, as cheerful as ever. “Lucky for you, I'm starting to get used to your brutish behavior,” Thomas said in a sing-song tone of voice as he grinned down at me, having easily avoided a rather painful interaction. “It's probably why they made me your guard, honestly,” he mused with a somewhat performative tap of his cheek. “I'm the only one who knows you like this,” he said, and though I hated to agree with him, I had to, considering the fact that he had been the one to find me, and that he always seemed to show up when I least expected, or even wanted him to.

He always seemed to have a rather odd way of responding as well, considering the way that he regarded me then, cocking his head and bending at the waist as he slowly walked around to the front of me and surveyed me with a single raised eyebrow, not so much as acknowledging the statue that had fallen in the background, nor the desperate calls from others deeper within the maze.

Though he did make a rather disgusted face when he finally stopped, finding his foot within a puddle of my tears as a verified sludge of mud greeted him. He snorted at the sight.

“I do wish I hadn't cried so much,” I muttered, hiding my face in my hands as Thomas gave a grimace at the wet, gooey sound of the mud gripping his boots. “I'm being punished for it now, I suppose, by having to see you,” I said dryly, knowing that there was not anyone I should like to see less than Thomas Caard at that moment—save for the Duchess, I supposed, or the Caterpillar.

“Yes, well, punishment or not, you’re going to have to come with me, you know?” Thomas said with a cock of his head, offering his hand in my direction. “You’ve caused an awful fuss with this whole being missing nonsense, and just about everyone is beside themselves,” he informed me with a roll of his eyes, stretching his fingers out to me. “I must admit, though, I was expecting a far warmer welcome from you, being your rescuer and all,” Thomas said, raising his brows in my direction as I shot him a look.

I sighed after a moment, though. “I suppose it is quite rude of me,” I resigned, finally taking his hand, yet still feeling odd in doing so. The Joker would always feel off to me, but... Well, the fact that he was there to begin with, didn’t that make him my friend? Perhaps?

Perhaps I had read it wrong when he had shown me the Jabberwock’s Mirror. Perhaps he had meant the best. Though why, I could not figure out.

Just as I couldn’t figure out the strange sparkle within his eyes when I finally took his hand, his grip feeling a little too tight, and his lips raising a bit too high. But beggars could not be choosers, and I most certainly was, then, a beggar.

And so, just as I had once before, I let Thomas take my hand, and I let him guide me out of the maze. I let him lead me past the blooming red roses and the strange white veins within their leaves. I let him usher me past the guards who sat within the labyrinth, and towards the entrance. And then, I let him pull me out, allowing me to appear at the end of the maze feeling strange; my eyes blinking as I took in the brightness of the afternoon sun, and the way that a pair of eyes cut up to me, having, I assumed, waited anxiously for my return from the maze.

I let Kaeden’s gaze meet mine, every inch of his pale skin marred with red scratches from the thorns of the rose bushes, and Fitzgerald, who stood at his side, stare at me. I let William, who spared me hardly a glance, glimpse in my direction and just as suddenly look away—

And I let the strange oddness of a single, missing individual amongst the brothers sink in, my eyes flickering rapidly as crowds of nurses crossed the lawn, and a single person remained out of sight, the Joker not so much as acknowledging the fact that he was gone.

And, though the weariness and the pain of having my clock toyed with had begun to set in, as well as the confusion and anguish of everything I had seen, one question somehow trumped the others—

“Where has the Cat gone?” I muttered, peeking back in the direction of the maze even as a blanket was thrown over my shoulders and a nurse fussed over me, my mind somehow far more concerned with the fact that Claude was nowhere in sight, and I couldn’t have been the only person to realize that, could I?

TWISTED COGS

There was a certain sort of oddity with what followed, for the remainder of the day sort of became a blurry haze, and I could hardly make sense of it all as I was ushered away from the maze, an assortment of Hearts' branded help flocking to my side as, behind me, my savior and guard followed, his steps a slow saunter as he stayed far out of the way without so much as acknowledging the absence of the Cat.

Then again, no one else did either.

No one so much as uttered Claude's name from the moment I reentered the Heart's Estate. They were all much too worried about me—which was quite disorientating, all things considered.

I really hadn't thought myself to be that bad off before that. Though the moment I'd so much as walked through the palace walls, people began to murmur of clocks and such, and eventually, Kaeden did care to break from the crowds of guards and court members to regard me, his eyes scanning me up and down with more than a hint of anxiety in them. But though he hugged me in front of everyone before being hastily pulled away by his brother Fitz, I didn't think it was all that bad, really. I was still walking about, which seemed to be the most basic of indicators that I would survive, but everywhere I turned, people spoke of clocks.

Clockwork this, clockwork that. Get her to the clocktower. Have the Clockmaker in Chess examine her chest—really, you would have thought that it was something terminal.

Thomas acted like it was nothing at all, though Fitz did admittedly fret, and William burst into tears murmuring something about not agains and all his faults. It was disorientating, to say the least. Especially when I

realized that the paintings watched me particularly closely as I followed the nurses leads and ascended the stairs, every single set of oil painted eyes regarding me as I passed by a chaise lounge upon which the Caterpillar laid.

I could not deny how odd it was that the Caterpillar, whose every breath was then a gasp, watched me just the same, his hands squeezing Tweedledum and Tweedledee's so harshly that the poor girls turned blue.

"He's only worried because they've begun looking for Oliver," Thomas said in my ear as he guided me by the arm.

"Why?" I squinted in those final memorable moments, the seconds before the doors were thrown open and a flash of light interrupted my gaze.

"Because they think he's the clown," Thomas said with a strange murmur of a laugh in those final moments. "The one to offend the Duchess, and the one to attack you," Thomas whispered in my ear upon my bewilderment, only to further my confusion. "Surely you must remember."

"I remember far too much," I murmured, furrowing my brow at the man as I tried to make sense of it all.

"Yes, well, they'll hopefully fix that too," Thomas said in the moments before I was ushered away, only further deepening my frown.

I still did not feel as if there were anything to be fixed.

THINKING LOUDLY AND SLEEPING SOUNDLY

Two days passed before I regained consciousness, my eyes opening to a bed that was not mine, in a room that was also most certainly not mine; not in any way familiar at all, all things considered, and though I previously thought myself adaptable, I found it all disorientating, really.

I could only faintly register the walls around me as being things that were real and solid as I slowly came to consciousness in a bed that was most definitely not my own, staring up at a blue ceiling that most definitely did not belong to any parts of Hearts that I had been in. The Hearts that I had known had always been a place of vivid reds, and dark, rich colors. The light, baby blue the decorated the walls around me seemed to wholly contradict that idea, And I could scarcely remember any of the rooms in the clock tower looking that way as well. In fact, I struggled to pinpoint any location that I could possibly be that would be decorated in such a way, and found myself blinking in confusion as I rolled over in my cot, concerned to find the gold band that I had been wearing what seemed like moments before sitting on a small metal table beside me, as well as a full, somewhat glistening glass of water. One that almost begged me to drink it, as many of the drinks in Wonderland often did.

But I had long since learned not to trust anything that I did not know, especially in Wonderland, and therefore I did not bother to even humor the notion of touching said refreshment, largely because I was afraid that if I did, I could very well die as a result.

Things were much simpler in England, I supposed. Though I could hardly explain to anyone in England exactly what it was that ailed me.

Perhaps I should have liked to be in England, instead, I mused, slowly scanning the room around me. An English infirmary would have been just as well, and then, perhaps, there would not still be that awful ticking sound, which irritated me and begged me to wonder if there was anything that could be found to silence it.

I took in everything slowly in search of such a solution, scanning for bit of cotton or something to stick in my ears.

There were metal cots, of course, because never had there ever been an infirmary without an assortment of loud, uncomfortable metal cots. My schoolhouse had two of them, and you could feel the springs sticking through them when you lay down. These were no different.

But instead of an assortment of needles, IV bags, and whatever else you would find in a traditional medical office, there were instead the sort of things that you would expect from Wonderland—Cabinets, mainly. Cabinets lined with rows upon rows of different liquids sitting within their glass vials, instructions and uses printed on little gift tags that hung from the necks of the bottles as spider webs practically glued the vials to the wooden cabinet walls. Beneath them, on a small counter, sat food; biscuits, mainly, though they looked to be as dry and stale as the soldiers had once made their English rations sound, and one could see the thick layer of dust sitting upon them all as well as lint that had settled in all the crevasses between the cookies.

I squinted at the cookies, struggling to read the label before I heard the slightest groan—Immediately, my head turned, only to find a tall male figure slumped in the chair beside my bed dozing heavily, his hair poking in all sorts of directions and his glasses askew, the man looking worse for wear, almost like he'd been there for days.

Which, all things considered, he likely had. Though how he'd managed to get around the Crown Court and the majority of Wonderland, I did not know. Surely not many knew where he currently rested.

Perhaps that was why he was less well cared for, the sight of him alone silencing the ticking in my head for a moment as a handy little rule of Wonderland came into play—if you forget about it, certain things will stop hurting. Not all, but certain things.

Trying to forget about people, unfortunately, would not get you very far. As my strange relationship with Kaeden illustrated, considering the fact that he was there and all, all bruised up and still sitting at my bedside.

An idiot, truly.

“Someone should at least have the kindness to give you a pillow,” I said, frowning at the sight of Kaeden perched so uncomfortably within his chair as I reached forward to lift his jaw with my hand, scanning my bed and the bedside table to find the wispy remainder of the thick wool that the nurses had undoubtedly pulled over my eyes to help me sleep.

Sometimes, it was much easier to rest when you did not know about anything, I supposed as I picked up the clump of wool and regarded it heavily within my hand. Though, I was not too fond of not knowing anything—for it seemed I did that far too often, and it was in fact getting rather old. Still, it would work.

“Here,” I said, placing the wool under his head. “Though you mustn't rest too long, I've heard that eventually, the wool does turn into sheep,” I murmured, though it was a very strange statement, all in all. Then again, I supposed mine was a very strange situation, considering the way that I allowed my hand to linger for a moment after I'd already put the wool away. “You shouldn't be sleeping here anyway,” I frowned, brushing my thumb over the raised scratches upon his jaw, a large helping of guilt rising within me as I examined Kaeden.

My eyes journeyed across him, noting the hand that rested on my woven blanket before landing on his arm—immediately, I looked away, trying to vanish the sight of the heavier bandages that sat there.

“I should have listened to you,” I admitted quietly, swallowing down the heavy weight that formed in the base of my stomach as I reached for his hand, giving it a firm squeeze before decidedly leaning towards his cheek, my lips puckered and my eyes shut—

“—Ahem!” A voice sounded, making me jerk back from Kaeden. No sooner had I heard it than my eyes traveled the room, only to find an older, near balding woman sitting upon the bed behind him, pretending to ignore me.

“...Hello?” I questioned as I leaned over to look past him, but the only response the woman gave was to cross her arms and continue staring at the wall. I raised an eyebrow. “Hello?” I tried again, but the woman said nothing at all. “...Alright then,” I replied after a moment, blinking in frustration, but pulling my hand away from Kaeden's all the same.

I tried to regard the room again.

An apple sat upon a table near the door, though that was so shiny and new that I had not a single doubt in my mind that it wasn't a part of the nursery, but rather it belonged to Claude, who was undoubtedly somewhere about, considering the fact that he wasn't overly prone to leaving me be; a behavior that I was glad for then more than ever—

“Ahem!” The woman said, and though I was mid thought, I was gracious enough to look back at her, only to find her looking away once more.

“Alright,” I muttered, shaking my head at the woman before looking back at the room and trying to continue on with my train of thought.

I supposed that it was good that Claude was not there, as he would have likely had more to say on the woman and just about everything. Claude always knew everyone, it was a remarkably useful trait of his.

I sighed as I sat up straight in my bed, my eyes catching on a large cuckoo clock that sat right above the door. Undoubtedly, it was the clock that was currently producing the strangely loud ticking noise that I seemed to find my heart moving in tune to.

Or at least some part of my body, some part somewhat deeper than my heart. I frowned as I considered it, watching as the second hands ticked on at an odd pace, a part of me wondering what would come through the doors of the clock at the hourly mark—

“You think awfully loud and far too much for a lady,” The woman upon the bed interrupted, shooting me a glare from where she sat. “It won't chime so long as you're here, just so you know,” she informed me haughtily, bobbing her head with her words as I looked in her direction. “Your clock is much too off for the hour to strike yet,” the older woman continued as I blinked rapidly in her direction, “that is why they put you and I in here, because our clocks are off,” she added, before throwing out another little tidbit. “And I am not old nor older,” she informed me, “despite what your incessantly loudly narration may imply.” The woman, who was evidently not old and should not have been addressed as such, straightened her back. “I am instead adequately fermented,” she assured. “Like a fine red merlot that has been well oxidized,” she informed me with defect-less dictation, giving me a look that very much implied— “—If you were to be a wine, you would be a cheap zin. Pink and a little tart,” she said, “though I suppose you do have a rather pretty boy, so there must be something appealing about you.”

A pretty boy? I raised a brow at her statement. Was she talking about Kaeden?

“—No, Kaeden is my pretty boy,” the woman said haughtily, turning towards me. “I’m talking about whoever that one is,” she said, pointing to the man that was most definitely Kaeden... Or not, as the narrowing of her strangely familiar eyes implied that I was wrong to assume. “Strangely familiar?” She gawked, looking at me as if I were quite the—

No, I should not have thought to give her the ammo, not when she seemed to know just about everything I was thinking of.

“—Of course I know everything you are thinking of!” She... yelled. Yes, yelled. That was a better word— “You think so excessively, don’t you?” She asked. “No wonder your head is so full of poppycock that everyone can read your narration,” she stated, ignoring the fact that she was the only one who could... I chose not to think about what she could do. “Good,” she said in response, “For you think far too much and— Argh!” She remarked in indignation, and suddenly the woman was crossing the room, tearing, yes, tearing at the wool that I had placed under Kaeden’s chin and shoving it in her ears as I stared at her.

I had no idea how much she had chosen to put into her head, but it seemed to be quite a lot, and I hoped that it was adequate—

“There,” she said, shaking her head. “Now I cannot hear your dreadful first-person point of view,” the woman informed me, looking disgusted at the very thought. “I would have thought that a girl of adequate enough standing to be put into this infirmary would have had the common sense to withhold her thoughts when occupying the same space as a queen, but I must have been wrong—”

“—You’re a queen?” I questioned, only to immediately be cut off.

“Louder!” She screamed directly in my face, and my eyes went wide for the fear that Kaeden may be woken up, only to gape at him mere moments later when he seemed to be in an even deeper state of sleep as the woman turned on her heels and walked away from me, revealing the bald portion of her scalp, and something else, something rather important —

The fact that she wore a wig.

Grumbling to herself, she murmured a few more obscenities about me as she pulled the hairpiece from her cot. “The Queen of Hearts,” I muttered in recognition, only to receive her cutting reply.

“My, you are bright,” she said sarcastically, unaware of how it astonished me to find that a woman so beautiful was nothing more than cleverly placed hair and nails. “You do know that half of the things you think to be pretty aren’t real, don’t you?” She replied to my thoughts as she settled the wig upon her head and adjusted the cotton within her ears. “Young girls,” she tsked, acting as if I were nothing more than a nuisance. Which, I guess, all things considered, maybe I was. “Whose are you?” She squawked but a moment later, and I could only open my mouth to reply, before having the immediate foresight to close it. “And yes, I said whose. Who do you belong to?” She pressed, leaving me speechless.

It was best not to say who I was, I supposed, because I did not know how much the Queen of Hearts truly remembered at any given time.

“I have the memory of a steel trap,” the Queen told me, as she adjusted her cotton and the other side of her wig. I stayed quiet. “Oh, don’t act like you’re so smart. I bet you don’t even know what’s wrong with you,” she said, raising a single eyebrow in my direction.

I had an idea of it. Sort of.

“Someone has toyed with your clock, child,” the Queen said. “Just as they will toy with Reginald’s, and have stopped Nephel’s,” she said, pinning the edges of her wig and rolling her eyes at me as if that made any semblance of sense, and I was meant to recall a ‘Nephel’ at all.

I could scarcely recall the King of Card’s name, after all, and I had heard it so many times before. To throw out something like ‘Nephel’...

“The Queen of Spades,” the Queen of Hearts continued at my confusion, her voice somewhat dismissive, but still demanding as she called my gaze back to her and shoved her finger far within her ear, letting out a satisfactory hum. “You’re fine now, by the way, I’ve stuffed my ears and done it well so I don’t have to hear your incessantly unnecessary thoughts,” the Queen of Hearts said, and I admittedly did breathe a sigh of relief, regarding the woman with some confusion.

I supposed she was crazy; a little strangeness was to be expected.

And yet, there she was, sitting upon another cot and looking somewhat older than she had appeared in the maze, like the image I had been given was one dated by a decade at the least, her wig colored to be more salt than pepper at that point, and her wrinkles deeply set as she sat upon the bed across from mine, her eyes trained on me and her long legs kicking off

from the side even as if she squinted in interest very obviously despite herself, tilting her head to the side as she regarded me.

It was eerily normal, and yet I'd seen it before. Not from her, but from other people.

From my grandfather once, on a visit when I was younger. One that ended with my mum leaving with tears in her eyes, and my father telling her to just dismiss it, to not get her hopes up too far because even for the moments that he was there, there would still be far longer ones in between in which he was not, and even when he seemed to be normal, he was hardly...

"Are you ignoring me now?" She asked incredulously, acting as if she were a perfectly normal, sane person who people were supposed to listen to all the time, rather than the very picture of madness that haunted Wonderland. "You know that's rather rude of you," the Queen said, and I could imagine the way that she raised her head in response to my behavior, pointing her nose up in the air as if I were but a mere worm that had slighted her. "I am trying to help you and catch a glimpse of your pretty boy," she said. "He makes me think of my son."

He is your son, I almost thought to say, but then had the foresight to hold it back.

"He is a very pretty boy," I agreed, turning away from her and looking back at the echoing cuckoo clock once again, "and I apologize for being distracted," I lied, "for I am waiting for the hour to toll," I said, eyeing the hands of the clock that edged ever closer to the hourly mark, now wanting to hear the chime.

The Queen of Hearts scoffed, but I did my best to ignore her.

Perhaps if it did toll, it would bring back my sanity with the sound. That seemed likely enough, all things considered, since logical, sensible things rarely happened in Wonderland, and the healing nature of a clock seemed to be very near many of the other strange things I had been forced to believe.

The moment that the minute, hour, and seconds hands neared twelve o'clock slot and seemed likely to allow the sound of chimes to hit the air and bring me some sort of relief, they all fell back, spinning counterclockwise back to the start as if only to tease me. My stomach sank at the sight.

"See," said the Queen of Hearts, her voice sounding far too proud of herself as she stood up and moved into my field of vision, pointing rather

jauntily at the clock. “Your timepiece is messed up, and now it is affecting this one as well,” the Queen said, shaking her head at me. “Just as Reginald’s will and Nephel’s did,” she informed, “though I suppose I shouldn’t say that, as Nephel is dead by now and Reginald will soon be too. Very, very dead,” she said, almost as if she knew that the statue would crumble in the courtyard but then she corrected herself. “Ah. Dreadful mistake of mine, I’m a terrible gossip—”

Or at least it seemed as if she knew that the statue would crumble in the courtyard, at least until her painted on brow somehow went higher, vanishing beneath her wig cap.

“You look pale,” she said, looking me up and down. “Oh, come now, Nephel’s statue crumbled ages ago,” she said, “and we all know that Reginald is soon to be dead, anyway. Cornelius promised they’d die together, after all, and you know what I know, don’t you? You must know what I know if you’ve been within these walls long enough, the people of Hearts are terrible gossips, really,” she said, assuming I did know what she knew, even though unfortunately, I did not.

But that did not mean I did not wish to know, which prompted me to straighten up, taking another fleeting glimpse at Kaeden before considering what I was going to do... was it immoral to lie to someone lost in time?

Well, I suppose I’d done worse things.

“I do know what you know, but assuming there was someone who did not know what you know, then what, per se, would they not know that you do know?” I said, careful not to trip over my own tongue.

For a moment, the Queen of Hearts regarded me, squinting in my direction almost as if trying to discern if I did in fact know what she knew—and all that jazz. It seemed she would not tell if I did not know, so in order to know, I needed her to tell me. And for her to tell me... well, I’d already gone through the whole song and dance, hadn’t I?

“The rumors, of course,” the Queen said, obviously deciding to play my game. Or perhaps, not play any game at all. I could not tell.

“The rumors,” I said with a nod, looking quite sure. “The rumors about...”

“About Cornelius’s boy?” The Queen looked at me as if I were stupid, and then rose from the bed as if it were an exhausting task she’d had to resign herself to, correcting my questions. “You know, not the ones about

the extras, but the others, the ones about the oldest,” she began. “Not the oldest oldest, though I did just see him outside, and he looks quite awful for eighteen,” she said, “I should hope that my Kaeden will turn out to be a far more good-looking sort of boy,” she stated, ignoring the sleeping elephant in the room that I nervously glimpsed back at.

Or rather, the sleeping Kaeden in the room, who was dozing peacefully. I should not have liked him to wake up and find out what she was saying. At least not now, while she went on and on about her darling boy, Kaeden and how he should be awful good to look at, unlike his father.

“—The Rabbit,” she said finally with a flourish of her hands, prompting me to whip my head back up at her, my eyes going wide. “Oh, come now, you must have heard.”

“About the Rabbit?” I swallowed.

And then she said something... something so odd, and yet said so calmly. Almost as if she didn’t understand the gravity of what she was revealing.

“That he’s poisoning him, the Rabbit is,” the Queen of Hearts said with a shake of her head, then grabbed the damn apple off of the counter and took a bite out of it almost like what she said meant nothing. “Come now, I’d gotten this news weeks ago,” she said with a laugh, regarding the stiffness of my shoulders and the paleness of my face. “A little bit, day by day, everyone knows this,” she said, as if it should have been common news for Fitz to be a murderer. Perhaps I was mishearing her, or —“Everyone of note in Hearts knows it,” she said, her voice growing grave. “That’s why the Queen of Clovers wants to try my husband... why she glares at my boy...” the Queen’s speech slowed as she regarded the apple in front of her, her eyes cutting up to me as a shallow breath escaped her. “Cornelius is so cruel to her boy, but she doesn’t care, only that the Rabbit succeeds him and... Well, the king of Cards is dying... and soon Reginald will as well,” she said, and I could see it in her, the way that her thoughts derailed and her eyes grew murkier.

“—How do you know Reginald will as well,” I interrupted, holding the Queen’s gaze and trying to keep her there—as far away from any thoughts of the previous King of Hearts as possible.

“Because the King of Cards has hired someone...” she began, her eyes beginning to rapidly blink as her hand fell on the counter beside her. “Someone trusted...” she said, and yet her eyes wandered back to Kaeden,

her breathing becoming uneven and her body slouching against the counter.

“Who,” I tried to urge, but her eyes remained on him all the same, her lips trembling. “Who does he trust?” I began as the Queen’s hand tightened on the counter and the name hung upon her lips, the faint sound of footsteps in the hallway barely registering between us.

Her mouth hung open, the words seemingly just upon her tongue, but her eyes scanned Kaeden’s features again and again, and the apple slipped from her hand.

“—Who—” I began, but it was almost as if she could not hear me.

“Kaeden,” she said quietly then, and though her eyes fell upon him as he slept, I knew.

“Who—” I tried again, my voice louder and more demanding, but it was a fruitless endeavor.

The look of light faded from her eyes the moment that the door beside her opened. She was lost again, and though two familiar faces, Fitz and William who she had met once before stood in front of her, she could not for the life of her remember their names. Nor could she even bother to learn her nurses' names again either.

“Have you seen my—” She began, having very obviously forgotten, her voice breaking through the air just as beside me, a man began to stir.

One that had been sleeping far too long before, but had awoken at the sound of his brothers arriving. One that, most definitely, should not have awoken right then.

And it must have been out of respect for her that I interrupted. Either that or thankfulness for the information she had tried to provide, correct or otherwise.

It was for the Queen of Heart’s sake that my voice grew loud enough to interrupt, cutting her words off before they could unintentionally hurt him, and snapping Kaeden’s attention all too easily away. “Kaeden,” I said, his name tasting as sweet as it ever did upon my lips, as he immediately turned my way.

He looked up and focused on me alone, the Queen’s question all but forgotten.

“Alice,” he said with a tone of heavy relief, unaware of what had occurred as the nurses began to swarm the room.

But even though the way he said my name was the same, much had changed, like the quickening ticking of a cuckoo clock above the door, or the way that Fitz dared to regard me then, no longer looking the same in my eyes.

I could not help but wish that the old Queen of Hearts had remained. Even if for just a second longer.

LIKE CLOCKWORK

Fitzgerald's snort was what snapped me back to reality, and unfortunately, reminded me of what I had only just learned about him—a rumor, nothing more than that, but a suspicious one all the same. One that I knew I could never ask him to refute.

“Right,” the Rabbit said with a roll of his eyes after what seemed to be an uncomfortable length of silence, doing his best to all but ignore the Queen as she was ushered out of the room while his younger brother watched. Fitzgerald took a step to block Kaeden's line of sight just as easily as he took a breath, shaking his head to himself as a frown pulled down the corners of his lips and his sarcastic remarks resumed. “So, she's Alice, you're Kaeden, I'm Fitz, that one is William, the nurse over there is Judy, and that one is Claire—so glad that we've gotten the business of names out of the way after all these months,” he drawled, slowly beginning to saunter in Kaeden and I's direction after the Queen had left, only to cast a dismissive glance over to our interlocked hands with another snort. “Perhaps we could wrap the rest of this up, seeing as how some of us still have a kingdom to run, and would very much like to get back to that,” Fitzgerald asserted as his hand dragged against the rail of my bed, unaware of how I watched him.

Or perhaps too aware, considering the way that he glanced over at me as he neared the nightstand beside my bed, undoubtedly noting the way that my hand tightened around Kaeden's even as he tried to pull it away, and the way that I swallowed nervously as Fitz regarded me, my mind cutting back to a simple fact that I surely had not lingered on long enough

Fitz very well may have killed his own father.

But I had known that he had killed someone, hadn't I? Since that day riding through the Deadwood Forest, he had said it himself. That's why I knew what the Queen of Hearts said was likely true, it was just... Well; I hadn't known it was his father, had I?

I couldn't fathom that. But I supposed I couldn't fathom much of anything, could I?

Fitzgerald sighed as he leaned over the nightstand, careful to block his actions from view so that I might not see them, but I did not need to so much as guess when he straightened and the ring had disappeared, his eyes drifting between Kaeden and I a final time as a sort of concluding glance, like he was looking to see as if the decision that he was making then was the right one. Those eyes lingered on me, taking me in for too long and making me oddly nervous as he reached his hand inside of his suit coat pocket, just as suddenly whipping his hand out in front of me.

"Eat that," Fitzgerald said, and a tiny, blackened cog sat on the palm that he had thrust out in front of my mouth. He scarcely allowed me a moment to think about it before shoving his gloved hand over my lips unceremoniously. "Come now," he said dismissively, almost bemusedly, as if not knowing whether he should be annoyed with my reaction. "I'd hardly poison you—" Fitz said, and no sooner had he pulled his hand away than I began to cough...

Only to find that Kaeden's free hand immediately covered mine, tilting my head back to make me swallow, his eyes wide and frantic as beside him, Fitzgerald raised a brow, watching as the discarded wool fell from his brother's shoulder. "It's your missing piece—" Kaeden began to say as I began to struggle, wincing as I bit his fingers. "Alice, please just—"

"—No, by all means, *don't* eat your piece," Fitzgerald said sarcastically as he turned away from the scene, looking somewhat annoyed. "God knows that things with you can never be easy," he said and received a swift kick in the shin as I tried my best not to eat the cog, only to end up failing miserably as, shooting a look over to me, Fitzgerald decided to do his finishing move...

He reached near the ankle that kicked him and pinched it, forcing me to promptly inhale and unfortunately swallow the cog, sputtering all over Kaeden's bandaged hand in the process as the youngest king shot me a pitying look. Immediately, the chiming began, mingling with the sound of

my coughing as Kaeden withdrew his hand from my mouth, each gag being punctuated by the sound of a bell as I fell back in my cot and barely processed the figure of the cuckoo clock moving to ring said bell.

It was odd to say the least, but everyone else seemed to breathe at that moment—save for William, who had lingered near the door, and was still oddly tracing his fingers along the pattern of the brick in the wall, perhaps uncaring as to my actual fate—whatever the matter, everyone else seemed happy with that. Especially the Rabbit.

“Well,” Fitz said, scarcely even looking at me as he shoved his hand back in his pocket and bent his neck. “My work is done,” he proclaimed, stepping away from the bed. “She’s fixed.”

Fixed. The words seemed strange. How could anyone really fix me or anything—though I supposed the ticking was gone, but the tiny little cog that I’d swallowed... Surely that wasn’t the cure. Even though everyone else seemed to think it was, considering the way that Kaeden just as quickly stood up from me and looked at his older brother, his mouth falling open somewhat immediately.

“Thank—”

“—I hardly need any thanks,” Fitzgerald interrupted as he somewhat brashly dismissed his younger brother, stopping in his tracks as he only barely looked his way. “I am merely doing what I am meant to do,” he told his brother, even as the youngest man somewhat awkwardly stared in his direction, his fingers curling at his side and his eyes still wide and somewhat impressed behind crooked glasses. “You do not thank people for doing their jobs, Kaeden,” Fitzgerald informed him.

“... Right,” Kaeden replied somewhat more reservedly as he stared after his brother. “Well, that’s—” He tried to say, but was cut off as the Rabbit tried to make his way out, just as coldly ignoring the statement as he had any other from the youngest brother. “... You’ll keep me in the loop when you check in on Claude?” Kaeden tried to ask, but that question was ignored as well.

It seemed the Rabbit did not wish to talk about anything that he didn’t have to... And that the Cat was still missing, though both William and Fitz seemed to hardly give the issue any regard, considering the way that William dawdled by the doorway and began tapping out silent melodies on the brick wall, and Fitzgerald simply stayed professional without a second thought.

“See to it that the nurses bring a palette and mix the pigments just so,” Fitzgerald said, shooting a look over his shoulder at Kaeden as he approached the door. “She’s off color,” he explained, seizing the elbow of William’s jacket and pulling him along. “Bed rest for two more hours at the very least, Alice, I am begging you,” Fitzgerald rattled as he pulled open the door and shoved William outside. “And for the love of all that is good, Kaeden Hart,” the Rabbit said as his final goodbye, allowing his glasses to fall down the bridge of his nose as he held onto the door and took a step outside, his eyes narrowed as he looked heavily between the two of us, “keep her clock at a steady pace. No stopping or starting, and certainly nothing to make time go too fast,” he said, giving his brother a rather reproachful look. “Her clock was just spun, no time was taken, of course, but you wouldn’t want to further mess things up,” he rambled, wrinkling his nose as his eyes lingered just a moment longer on Kaeden, not daring to wander in my direction.

“And Claude—” Kaeden tried again before the man could shut the door on us, perhaps knowing exactly what I was wondering, or maybe wondering it for himself. The look in Kaeden’s gaze then simply said that dismissal would not be allowed, and the Rabbit only barely seemed to tolerate that.

Though, admittedly, the Rabbit barely seemed to tolerate anything about the younger king. Or anyone else for that matter, considering the way he ignored William and gave an exasperated sigh as the Hatter began to try to wander away down the hall, murmuring something about Manon without so much as a courtesy glimpse back at his brothers. It seemed the Rabbit would have to catch his older brother once he was done speaking to Kaeden and I, an action that he definitely seemed to dread.

“Claude always comes back,” Fitzgerald informed Kaeden gravely, even though the younger brother’s face didn’t wholly seem to believe that. “He’s a domesticated animal,” Fitz said, as if to quiet his brother’s fears. “He’s probably laughing it up in his palace, waiting for one of us to go check on him. I honestly would not bother worrying,” he said, and yet there was something strange about his tone, as if Fitz knew something more, something that went unsaid.

He stood there for a moment longer, just one, and only seemed to breathe, almost as if he were truly considering his younger brother just then. But no one could really tell what he was deciding, not with the way

that his lips pulled tight, and he shook his head to himself somewhat dejectedly, elbowing William before he could so much as get a word in.

“Goodbye,” he said after that moment. Not to me, though, that would have made sense, but to Kaeden.

Just goodbye.

And just like that, the Rabbit was gone. As was any hint of where Claude was.

The moment that the door shut, I could not help but worry, almost completely forgetting the strange ordeal I’d just gone through as I stared at the door, my mind immediately moving towards the question of Claude and where, in the last two days, he could have gone.

Kaeden must have known I’d be concerned.

“Often times, when he is gone, he is only up to more trouble,” Kaeden informed me as he looked away from the door. “It is in his nature,” he said.

“But it is also in Claude’s nature to be social and meddling,” I argued, staring after the Rabbit, “and kind, and passionate, and perhaps sometimes a good friend.”

“That is a great problem with Claude,” Kaeden said with a swallow, and yet something about the way he said it made me feel almost as if there were something left unsaid, as if he knew more, but chose to keep it to himself.

It seemed that he was keeping quite a few things to himself, a realization that had me pursing my lips as I looked up at him, my mind moving at rapid speed towards the mirror, his nonengagement, whatever conversations he had been having with the White Knight in Spades—

“It’s not as you think,” Kaeden immediately concluded, raising his hands defensively as he regarded me, a hint of fear almost immediately showing on his features the moment that he realized the road my brain had gone racing down. “I am willing to tell you anything that you like. In fact, I would love to tell you anything that you like—” he began, not realizing the can of worms he was opening, nor how quickly I would seize it.

“—The mirror,” I said promptly, and almost immediately, he deflated, stopping mid conversation to stare at me with his hands still lingering in the air. “... That’s what I thought,” I huffed, dismissing him far too suddenly as I felt my hopes, every single one of them that I had been

starting to form over the course of a week, get dashed as I knew there was no way he would ever fully digress such information to me.

“It’s broken, I told you that,” Kaeden said, his voice a certain shade of miserable. “It broke when the Jabberwock came through, that is not a lie, I would not lie about that,” he said seriously, pausing to lick his lips as he seemed to take an exceptionally long breath to steady himself and readied himself for what was to come. “The only thing I lied about was not knowing where it was, which I have a reason for, which is that it is broken,” he said.

“Yes,” I said sarcastically, nodding along with him. “And we all know no item that is broken can ever be fixed, or made to be at least somewhat useable,” I stated, only for Kaeden to lean over and purse his lips, stopping my nodding by catching my chin between his forefinger and thumb.

He furrowed his brows in frustration as he looked back at me, shaking his head. “Useable, yes, returnable, no,” he said, as if that made any measure of sense, and I shook my head at him, frustrated by the insistence of his hands upon my jaw. “You need magic to steady the glass, which you do not have, Alice,” Kaeden informed me rather gravely, “and which does not exist in any measure in your world.”

“So?” I questioned, failing to see his point, which only seemed to exhaust the man, considering the way that he dropped my chin and let out the shortest, most frustrated laugh.

“So, you go through once, but you can never go through again,” he informed me, “because if you change your mind, you have no way of communicating with the other side. If I look in that glass, I do not see the same thing as you. I’ve never been to your Oxford, I only see myself—” He said.

“—So, I’d find another way back—”

“How?” Kaeden pressed, shooting me the oddest of looks, almost as if he were amazed by me. “Let me clarify, by the time I realized what the mirror was, you were already knee deep in Wonderland, and though you denied it, I could tell you had little intention of staying in England,” Kaeden stated, as if that would soften the blow, “and while it was always possible for your father to find another way back...” He spoke slowly then, as if easing me into the concept.

“What?” I questioned, squinting in his direction, unable to stop myself from leaning towards him.

“... I’m thinking of a way not to offend you...” Kaeden easily admitted, a grimace sitting upon his face that had me wrinkling my nose with a pre-emptive scowl. “No, it is not a fault of yours, Alice, truly,” Kaeden said the moment that my expression changed, only concerning me further.

“It is just something that you think that I lack,” I supplemented dryly, only causing him to recoil, which I just would not have.

I reached towards him, grabbing his shoulder and pulling him towards me, dragging the man another two inches up the bed as I forced his gaze to meet mine, my expression still confused and overall insulted as he did his best to pick his words.

I think he might have even grown a little pale.

“What do my father and yours have that I lack?” I asked. “Engineering degrees?” I scoffed at the thought of that and of a man being smarter than me, only to see Kaeden grow somehow ever paler. “... Oh, is that what has convinced you?”

“It’s not something that you lack,” Kaeden said, only to further inflame my temper. I did not know that it was possible, but my eyes narrowed further. “It is rather your one defect. You jump first and listen last,” he concluded, leaving me to momentarily decode his meaning for a second...only to open my mouth to protest the statement and just as quickly snap it shut.

Hm.

I opened my mouth again, but double thought my words once more, blubbing like a fish as I tried to find a proper reaction as Kaeden grimaced. Surely, what he said was not true, not about me... Only...

“You have a great many wonderful traits...” Kaeden said as I stared at him, and I winced. “I do love you dearly...”

“If you loved me dearly, then why would you even bother to humor the Duchess’s girls?” I pointed out, only to hear him laugh. I did not expect him to laugh.

“You know why.”

“Say for a chance that I don’t know why—”

The look he gave me was incredulous and almost somewhat insulted. The moment I turned away, of course, he wasn’t having it, so he made a final, rather stupid decision. Someone should have told the man that it was rather rude to crawl upon someone’s bed and stand on your knees leering

over them, or to cock your head and lean over so that you could peek into the corner of their field of vision, but I supposed he'd never learned proper etiquette like he would have in England. If he had, he would have known better than to pull faces, better than to linger so close, and better than to look so utterly bewildered with me. It was simply rude. He was rude.

He was rude, but he was, in a way, mine. So, I supposed, all things to be considered, I could forgive just a little of that, or at least let him take my hands.

"Your glasses are askew, and your hair is a mess," I informed him somewhat petulantly, only for him to smile and shake his head, leaning towards me and tenderly brushing his lips against my cheek.

"Alice, I do not wish to be the King of Cards," he told me. "I am playing a role. I am trying to give them what they want, but I have no intentions of... Never. Not unless it is with you," Kaeden said, his hands tightening upon mine. "And even then, that will have to wait until Fitz is married, or William sees the error of his ways."

"Or Claude finds a suitable, yodeling bride," I provided with a sigh before he could forget, only to realize that he looked away right then, and he did not look back. "Kaeden."

"I was wrong. There are some things that I cannot tell you," Kaeden conceded with a grimace as he refused to look my way.

"—What is Claude up to—" I interrupted, dashing onward to the next logical train of thought, even if Kaeden made it clear he did not wish to tell me. That was an easily fixable problem, anyway, as it was just as easy to seize his shoulder and yank him forward until our foreheads touched, and he had no choice but to look my way. Even if he did look uncomfortable, his breath uneven as his eyes met mine.

It was then, however, that I had a most terrible realization. Or rather, recollection. Because Kaeden Hart had rather beautiful eyes and a rather handsome sort of face. That was a problem.

That was a problem, as was the lack of space, and the way his lips sat so near to mine, and he did not so much as blink.

I think the world would have been better had I hated Kaeden Hart, though I never had any proof, for I never had a proper chance to test my theory. Even when I begrudged him for his general demeanor and way of existing, I still could not deny that he had something, or rather multiple somethings, that I could never resist.

Because the moment our eyes met, I wanted to kiss him, and the moment I tried to pull away, he knew. He knew far too well.

“After tonight, everything will be fine,” Kaeden assured me, his voice low and far too intimate as his hand rested on my thigh. “I swear to you, we will find another way for you to see your mother, and everything will be just as well. You just need to believe—”

“I believe you,” I breathed, and I genuinely, truly did, though I could never fully explain why. Not after all that had happened.

Perhaps I just needed to. Perhaps my thoughts had been interrupted. Perhaps the Cat strayed far from my mind. Who could say? Who could say anything at all, when, at that moment, I did not seem to have any thoughts, just a bed sheet clung tight within my hands and a man sitting directly in front of me, one who I had fantasized about perhaps one too many times; because love did rather ridiculous things, didn’t it? It made me forget everything that had ever gone wrong.

Especially when he smiled, for it was his smile that had broken me once before, and it was his smile I still struggled against to that day. It took effort to pull away from him, effort and far too much self-control, but I did it, I managed to. I managed to escape his gaze and give him only one small victory, only one small hint of praise as my heart hammered behind my ribs and a tiny pang of pain resounded—I sighed, wishing that I could trust myself to touch him.

It was a moment of complete and utter defeat for me, paired with only a hint of success for Kaeden.

But victories were victories, weren’t they? And though my hand relinquished his collar, and I pulled ever so slightly away from him, I stood no chance of escaping him. Not when he heard it in my every breath.

I should have expected the way that his marred hand rose to the back of my head. I should have anticipated the way his body shifted closer, and his thumb trailed across the back of my hand. I should have known there was danger as well when, mystified by his expression, I could see only his lips, and hear faintly what he said.

“If you believe me, then listen when I tell you not to run.”

As if, before that moment, I could have heard anything that he said. I was lost the moment that he moved his mouth, and beyond saving when, mere seconds later, those lips collided with mine and this excellent thing called forgetting began.

STOPPING AND STARTING

“Breathe,” was the first word that escaped Kaeden’s mouth the moment that he pulled away from me, the sound barely whispered as his thumb caressed my bottom lip, his eyes lingering upon mine while a small, pleasant smile rang upon his lips, beckoning for them to be kissed again.

When I tried to, however, I was disappointed to have my shoulders gently pushed away, even as I threw my arms around his neck, and was greeted with the slightest pitying look as he examined me.

“No quick starting or stopping,” he said simply enough, and though I did not understand what he meant at first, it took only a moment for my mind to dance back to what the Rabbit had said. I eyed the clock upon the wall, a frown playing upon my lips as I reconsidered it all. Kaeden chuckled as I opened my mouth to protest, his laugh a low, comforting sound, but I could scarcely get any words out as he climbed to the side of me, looping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me into his side as the two of us sat tight in my narrow cot with my legs thrown over his. “I will reward you later, when it is just the two of us within my room,” Kaeden promised. “I have a gift for you tucked in the nightstand, one that I meant to give you in Spades,” he informed me, raising a single wrapped finger as if to remind me to wait.

I blinked at the feeling of it all, but then regarded him warmly as he wove his hand through mine, his head resting briefly at the base of my neck as he pressed a quick kiss to my shoulder, just as briefly pressing a kiss to the base of my hairline as he pulled away, his arm still wrapped firmly around me.

“Is this alright?” He asked, but I didn’t know how to fully conceptualize that it was and it was not, for it was simply not enough. So, at most, what I did was shake my head, wrapping both of my arms around his waist and burying myself against his chest, my eyes closing as the faint smell of him filled my head.

Sweet, he smelled sweet. He would always smell sweet. I closed my eyes in relief, happy just to be beside him, and far more than content as his fingers brushed against my side, mapping out a pattern against my skin.

“I’m worried about you, Alice,” he admitted, but I just shook my head, for once feeling like words weren’t entirely necessary, I was content to just rest against him, closing my eyes and letting the fact that it was him hit me, as well as something else.

Something I had nearly forgotten, and remembered with a far too painful jolt, one that he immediately recognized.

“I know,” was the simple thing he said the moment he felt it, immediately recognizing what it was that ailed me as his arm tightened around me. “I saw,” he said, and no further elaboration was needed, not in a situation like mine. He had seen the statue, he had known what happened, the way that I scrambled through the rubble and tried desperately to make sense of it all. Somehow, that made it all feel worse and more real in the end, because someone else had known that my father was gone, and that made it an inescapable fact.

And I still could not bring myself to cry.

“I want to speak about happy things,” I said instead, closing my eyes and sinking further into him as I held on for dear life. “I want to think about the future, and what will come, I don’t want to look back at the past,” I said, as if the future was not in itself a wholly horrible idea as well, and there were not dangers lurking at every corner.

At the very least, Kaeden managed not to comment on that. At the very least, Kaeden managed to calm the ebbing sensation underneath my skin, the one that made it feel like everything around me was moving too fast and slowly beginning to consume me. It was something about him, about the way that he gave a simple nod and made it all seem so easy as his lips graced the crown of my head and he allowed himself to slide further down the bed, laying with me still tightly gripped to his side, simply existing. The only thing he did that made me nervous was remain silent for a

moment too long, long enough for me to cast him a pleading look as I adjusted his glasses and silently begged him to do both the best and the worst sort of thing; lie to me.

But the strange thing was, I wasn't even sure if it was a lie that he was telling, or if he'd often thought of the idea before and already knew all of the details of how life would be between the two of us.

"I will play my part, smile when I am told, and convince the Courts that they are close to getting their King of Cards," Kaeden said slowly, his leg bouncing slightly as if from nerves, but his voice low and relaxing, especially when he spoke the next words, sounding so wistful at that moment. "They will want to make me happy, and you will be freed," he said, his fingers curling into my side as I willed myself to believe him. "I will drop the pretense and stop acting, they will always suspect, but they will never know, as I will spend nearly every hour that I am allowed at your doorstep, trying to entice you to come to mine," Kaeden stated, shaking his head with a slight chuckle at the thought of it all, as if he could almost see it. "Home will grow dreadfully tired of me."

"Home would never tire of you," I corrected somewhat immediately, shaking my head into his chest. "Because I like you, and the more that you are around, the happier I will be," I informed him, knowing all too well that very likely was the case, even as Kaeden laughed at my side.

"You say, but it is only in my nature to monopolize you, and Home and Claude will find it dreadfully annoying, as will Fitz when he comes around —"

"—Fitz visits in your idea of the future?" I questioned, unable to stop myself from throwing him a look, a grin playing upon my features and a giggle lingering behind my smile as I took in his expression regarding it all, one of playful severity.

"Well, yes, because someone has to fix the clock, don't they?" He joked, and I wrinkled my nose at him and blew a raspberry. "He will begrudgingly begin to like me in the future, I'm hoping, either that or continue to hate me so much that it is fun," Kaeden said, a flicker of mischief that was so similar to Claude resting on his face long enough that it practically entranced me, enticing me to rest my chin against his chest so that I could watch him. "It will be hard for him, at first, because I will admittedly kiss you far too much," Kaeden admitted with the slightest of nods, his hand trailing down my back. "But eventually, I will temper off."

“You will temper off?” I asked, only for him to nod in grave sincerity.

“Yes,” he said. “I will kiss you only ninety-two times in the morning, rather than four hundred, and at night, I will take breaks,” Kaeden informed me, prompting me to snort, grinning ear to ear at him. “You will also laugh far too much and as we know, Fitz hates laughter, and anything fun—”

I thumped him on the chest in playful disagreement, but almost agreed, picturing how the Rabbit would react to a house constantly full of three kings, and the occasional four, if William ever got around to visiting. It was his nightmare, probably. Or at least he’d claim it was, but everyone would know that it most certainly wasn’t. Everyone would know that Fitz looked over at his brothers far too often and wished to have what they did.

“You and I will wait,” Kaeden interrupted my train of thought, his voice still light and wistful as his fingers tapped out patterns across my spine. “Days, months, years, decades—forever, if you wish, for marriage is only a formality, and loving you is far more pressing to me,” he admitted, looking down at me through the bottom of his glasses as finally, his other hand rose to brush a few stray strands of hair away from my eyes while he regarded me, tucking them thoughtfully behind my ear. “If you wish to be married, then I will marry you, but if you don’t, then that is just as well, I will still love you just as fervently whether or not a simple piece of paper is involved,” Kaeden said, reassuring me as his hand lingered within my hair, twisting a few locks around his fingers. “We’ll have children if you want them, a true mountain of them if that’s what you wish, but I would be just as happy with none, so long as I am still allowed even a moment of your time,” he admitted, smiling down at me in that slow, warm way that always made me feel at home, as if nothing bad could ever happen and nothing bad ever had, even when I knew the opposite to be true. “And if we are lucky, and you wish for such things as paper and ink to be involved, then someday my brothers will marry before me, and we will be bound,” he said. “But either way you are brilliant just as you are, and I should love to spend more time with you, married or not,” Kaeden informed me, and, then, almost as if it were an afterthought but one that he should like me to know, he added, “lovers or not. Though I should like to be lovers, if I am being honest,” he admitted, as if such a concept as him not loving me were even capable of existing, or as if I would ever tire of him, and the smiles that I found I could make grace his lips.

Ridiculous, truly. Impossible. I hated the thought and sought to correct the fact that he was even capable of considering such a thing, leaning over to him and briefly, just briefly, pressing my lips to his, if only to see the way that his eyes softened and his hands went slack, his face forever gentle.

I don't believe that I had stopped loving him for even a moment—no matter how impossible it may have sounded.

Did Mary know such a joy? Did Peter? Had my mother?

Had my mother missed my father like this? The thought made my eyes burn, bubbles of tears forming at the corners of my eyes.

Not pretty, fragile tears, but large, wet ones. The kind that made a woman ugly and smeared all of her make up and left her in a state of disrepair. The kind that my mother would have never allowed.

"It's alright, Alice," Kaeden whispered, his arm tightening around me as he pulled me further into him, placing his head upon mine. "You should cry," he said, reassuring me. "Something bad has happened."

"Yes, but I cry far too much," I replied, wishing that I could stop.

Kaeden held me a bit tighter, shaking his head into mine. "Nonsense, for some things there is simply no too much," he said, reassuring me with a simple touch. "When you are sad, you will cry, and that is a matter of fact; being sad is not something that many people can control, some don't even have a reason why, but is it something that can happen, and it is something that, though painful, can be rather good. Don't be ashamed to be upset," he said. "You can cry five million tears, and I will remain here, right at your side, and invest in an umbrella if I get too wet," Kaeden assured me, lulling me into a sense of comfort.

It was remarkably strange how he could always say such things, which were strange at best, and I would believe him without question. But I supposed that was the nature of everything, and this, lying in bed teetering between being both happy and sad? That was just another part of the great mystery known as life, and more specifically, life in Wonderland, an adventure which I would never forget.

A RUDE AWAKENING

I do not know when he stopped consoling me, nor when I fell asleep. Just as I did not know when the day had turned to night, or Ava had drawn the curtains gracing the window, tight. But I did know that it was dark when I awoke, and Kaeden only barely shifted under me, and that I had no inclination of staying awake as I traced my thumb across his lips and rested my fingers on his jaw.

Nor did I have any as he turned over beneath me, unable to understand what it was that had awoken him, or why he had awakened in the middle of the night, just that I was there beside him, and all was right.

For a moment, at the very least.

And he settled just as I did as the estate gave another sudden jolt, the now familiar ministrations of the Jabberwock at hand.

“Jaxton,” I murmured in dismissal as I finally moved to lie at Kaeden’s side, as it was early, and I did not wish to get up.

“Jaxton,” he agreed in a mumble as he settled in in front of me and pulled my fingers from his jaw, his eyes closing helplessly as I began to pull his glasses off.

I hummed. I don’t know if it was the hum that did it, or the memory of the words that only just sat upon his lips, but somewhere before I could fully remove his glasses from his eyes, Kaeden’s back went rigid, and his muscles tensed. His eyes flew open from behind his lenses without a single explanation as his brows furrowed and his voice became far too clear.

“Jaxton?” He questioned, though I wasn’t sure if the question was for me or him as I raised a brow in response and stopped trying to remove his

glasses.

“Jaxton,” I said after only a moment, blinking at his strange behavior and the way I felt him inhale beside me, but not exhale, the word following only confusing me further.

“Claude,” he said, and nothing more than that as he jolted up in the bed, his face going pale. Pale enough to see in even the dimmest of light, as something rather unexpected seemed to be happening.

THE CAT WHO DID NOT GET THE CREAM

“**W**hat do you mean ‘Claude?’” I demanded the moment that Kaeden had so much as uttered the other man’s name, but no sooner had I said it than Kaeden was yanking the curtains aside, looking out the window onto the Hearts’ lawn, and muttering rapidly under his breath. “Kaeden,” I said forcefully as he yanked the curtains shut, blocking the dim orange light that came from outside the moment that it began to fill the room, but not taking away my understanding of what it meant in the slightest—

I knew how to recognize a fire. Just as I knew how to recognize when Kaeden was in a great deal of distress, considering the thin coating of sweat he now wore, and the way that he desperately felt around the nightstand beside my cot, before realizing that the glasses that he was looking for were currently on his face.

Immediately, he turned on his heel, and he would have had to be stupid not to realize that I would follow him.

“What is Claude doing?” I demanded, only to receive no reply as Kaeden helplessly ran his hand down his face, taking a deep gulp before opening the door—

Chaos. So much chaos and so many guards running across the floor, practically diving for the staircase with their red spears in hand and terror in their eyes as all along the walls, the paintings sat empty; the figures having long since been removed so that they did not become marred nor damaged when they were inevitably knocked from the wall by another jolt of the manor as the centermost building of the Hearts Estate had already very evidently become lopsided, considering the way that all the furniture

rested against the left side. Kaeden's eyes only briefly took in the damage as he went completely silent, his mouth agape in shock.

"Kaeden," I urged, still desperate to know what exactly was going on, and it was my pull upon his shoulder that brought him back to reality, and caused him to shake his head to himself, his long legs already beginning to move.

Luckily, I had become far too skilled at keeping up.

"Alice, I cannot begin to explain to you, as it is not my secret to elaborate upon—" Kaeden tried to deflect, a heavy grimace sitting upon his features as he did not so much as bother to look back at me, perhaps knowing the expression I would make in response. "I have to find Claude —"

"What has Claude done—"

"—Alice—" Kaeden begged with gritted teeth as he stopped in the center of the hall and looked back at me, worry and terror mingling together on his features to form a single expression, one that was not easy to look at. "You need to go back to the infirmary, or better yet, your room —" He tried to demand, as if that would do much to stop me, I only stared at him, my brows knitting and my jaw locking as I stood defiantly behind him. "Alice, I am begging you—"

"—Where is Claude?" I growled, my fists clenched at my side and my eyes narrowed as I took him, and everything else really, in. My mind attempted to rush to a conclusion when he flinched instead of providing one, but very few conclusions that I could make at that moment made any sense. "Is he fighting the Jabberwock? Is he trying to get revenge?" I questioned as the face of Claude, and the scars that sat upon it, entered my mind. It would have made sense, it would have—

But he was going to warn Manon when the Jabberwock was to die earlier than expected, wasn't he? But then... It was Claude, wasn't it? He wouldn't be so stupid or so bold as to—

"—Do not leave without me!" I exclaimed in irritation as Kaeden somewhat robotically swung upon his heel and tried to walk away, evidently noticing the thoughts that had crossed my features, and deciding to capitalize on them instead. "Tell me, did Claude let the Jabberwock out?"

"It is not as easy as that," Kaeden said with a wince as he shook his head and very evidently tried to use his long legs against me, walking

through the halls at a breakneck pace and not so much glancing at the windows—likely not because they would distract him, but rather because he knew what sat out there, and what horrors had already happened.

“It would be far easier for me to understand if you were to explain it to me,” I told Kaeden, scurrying to enter his view the moment that he raised his eyes from the ground and blocking his field of vision as he tried to look at the paintings on the wall.

“No, what would be far easier is for you to go to your room, turn off the lights, and stay there for the night—” Kaeden countered, just as quickly turning his gaze away from mine, almost as if he knew the look I would shoot him in response.

I scowled, unamused, and perhaps it was my scowling that really did the trick when it came to Kaeden.

“There are some secrets that are not mine to tell, Alice,” Kaeden admitted.

“What a handy way of saying that you refuse to tell me,” I remarked dryly as the two of us finally neared the staircase, which Kaeden regarded with both a great deal of hesitation and concern, likely because he had realized something that I had long ago—there was never any telling what direction Claude went in. That was the curse of the Cat. You had to be intuitive to know where he went. You had to see the clues, the signs.

Kaeden’s only advantage seemed to be that he had a relatively good idea of what Claude’s plan was to begin with, which was to say that he knew roughly where Claude would be if things had gone to plan—and subsequently knew not to go there.

“The Crown Court is at your neck,” Kaeden said with a swallow as he jerked his head back to stare up at the many stairs that led from the room, the east staircase if I had to guess since I was terrible with directions, any of the four corners were always better to sneak out of when one was trying to retain discretion.

But going up? That was not a way to escape at all—and then my mind danced back to the large, leathery wings of the Jabberwock. I suppose I had to disagree with myself.

I suppose I had to follow Kaeden, if not only to find Claude, but to get some sort of answer.

“He’s doing this for Manon, isn’t he? But if he’s willing to do this now and yet let her get locked in the locket when she was in Spades— Is he

trying to help her escape with the Jabberwock? My god he is, isn't he? Kaeden—"

"—If the Crown Court so much as sees you near this, they will pounce on it—" Kaeden muttered as he ran beside me, somehow doing his best to recover from another grand shake of the building as the two of us ran up the staircase, and tried not to feel lightheaded and terrified upon hearing the Jabberwock's horrific screech.

Though Kaeden was not wholly undistracted, considering the fact that he reached back to offer his hand to me the moment that I fell, not so much as realizing what a grand mistake that was, as it gave me purchase.

"I don't care about the Crown Court, I care about Claude," I argued as I locked my hand around his, allowing Kaeden to haul me up the stairs with little ceremony, and only further adjusting my hold on him as he pulled me near him, only to turn pale and frantic the moment that he realized I had attached myself to him.

"Alice, there are Crown Court Guards teeming within the manor, if they so much as see you near me," Kaeden begged as he looked down at our interlocked hands with wide eyes, his breath hitching as the man fell into a pale sweat. He tried and failed to remove me, but that only made me more determined. "This is not like the old days, Alice. This is not the two of us alone with just my Card Guards teeming about the halls. There are guards for the Courts, and they will see you," as if that was any argument at all, or could do anything to stop me as my mind raced ahead to Claude and the stark realization that somehow, I was failing him again. "Alice, the Courts are desperate for a King of Cards—" Kaeden remarked as he gave me a pitying look, his hand bracing us as the palace gave another shudder.

"I am desperate for Claude—" I replied, but it was not the same as it was before. Not angry and demanding, but resigned and desperate as my eyes turned pleadingly upon him, the distant calls of screaming Card Guards filling the air and only furthering my assurance that something would, or already had happened to Claude. "What does the King of Cards matter when your brother and my friend is in danger," I remarked, causing Kaeden's hold to loosen upon me and his eyes to go soft.

Perhaps I cried. I may have. I didn't know anymore. My face was still swollen and stinging with the tears I had shed earlier that day, so it was a possibility.

“Claude has nine lives,” Kaeden said simply in reassurance, and yet everyone knew that wasn’t true. At least not where I came from, and if it was? Then I suspected that the Jabberwock’s first encounter with him had taken seven of them. “Alice, we need to get you to your room, and you need to let go of me—” Kaeden pleaded, shooting me a heavy look as another desperate scream from the Jabberwock hit the air. “I will find Claude, I promise you, but—” His head jerked towards the staircase, looking upwards again and perhaps regarding the amount of distance left to cover, as he was hardly a creature of mischief and trickery that could simply come and go from whatever place in reality he wished.

“Why do you fear being King of Cards, anyway?” I asked him, perhaps somewhat abruptly considering the way that his head swiveled back around to look at me, and his mouth dropped open, his eyes lingering upon me as he searched for an answer.

Only to have that answer stolen from him as a high pitched, hollow shriek hit the air, a sound akin to a gunshot trailing behind it not even a second later. The candles in the staircase flickered as the room gave a jerk, nearly knocking Kaeden and I from our feet and leaving us standing hopelessly as another cracking sound began, and yet again, another inhuman shriek rang through the halls, like the wind tearing through the branches of a long gone forest, ripping the limbs from the trees as it did so; leaving Kaeden to only stare at me, horror showing on his features in what little I could see in the moonlight that dived between the narrow windows of the landing.

He wetted his lips; I thought it was to say my name, but then the surrounding walls gave a strained creak, one that made his spine straight and the regret show upon his eyes. “Ava,” was the name Alice morphed into as immediately the hand upon my shoulder flew from me and slapped onto the wall, the look on Kaeden’s face nothing short of terrified as the brick behind his hand fell through the wall, almost as if it had never been attached.

I think that made his decision for him regarding me. I think the terror of that moment made him have to come to a hasty conclusion.

“We have to move, Alice,” Kaeden concluded with a swallow as he looked at the gap within the bricks, his breath labored and his eyes shining as he turned from me, biting his bottom lip. “We need to get to the top

floor if we are going to find Claude, and pray that he had not done something stupid,” Kaeden concluded, doing his best to pull me along.

“This is already remarkably stupid,” I argued with a shake of my head, my mind briefly noting the way that the floors beneath us had lost their luster and slowly become brittle and coarse. “Why would Claude risk his life—” I asked, and however I did it, whatever move I made—that was the breaking point for Kaeden. The final moment that he could give me patience as he whirled on the staircase to look back at me, his voice far too loud and exhausted to be kind as he said it.

“Because he is in love with Manon!” Kaeden said suddenly, as if that should have been an obvious fact, and one I should have known instinctually, instead of just some confounding thing he said to me. As if Claude would never care to mention it, when he spent nearly every day in my presence, and seemed to care dearly for me. As if Claude hadn’t tampered off of seeing Manon sometime around the moment that he befriended me, perhaps even fitting me into an already existing slot in his life—

“No,” I said simply, even as Kaeden tensed his jaw and looked back at me with pleading eyes, having heard the way that the sound was quickly beginning to die outside. “That doesn’t make any sense. He cannot love her. Manon is for William. She always has been. She’s always been in love with him, and Claude? Claude would never love anyone.”

“Claude loves many things,” Kaeden told me, tugging me up another step.

“Not like that,” I informed him, because it simply could never make sense.

Claude danced with whoever he liked, kissed people as frequently as he wanted, and came home covered in the pollen of flower girls. He played games and tricks and relished in making other people blush. He laughed freely and smiled easily and was never ever tied down. He was a friend to many. Not an excellent friend, but a friend all the same. The idea of him having been in love, it was almost laughable!

“Claude only has alliances, acquaintances, and dalliances,” I remarked, knowing his statement by heart. “He cannot be in love with Manon,” I stated, shaking my head somewhat rapidly, because the idea of him being in love like that, it made my head jump to other things, questions I should not have and thoughts I should not have delved into. “Manon and Claude

are friends, just as Claude and I are,” I said with a simple dismissal. “Close friends,” I informed him, and Kaeden did not deny that as he looked back at me, because he couldn’t.

But the thing was, it probably would have been better if he had denied it. Because then I wouldn’t have over thought things. I wouldn’t have made guesses and assumptions and filled in a few blanks and realized that when I showed up, Claude spent more time around me and less time around Manon. Days and weeks with me, really, talking about everything under the sun, and forming a near sibling-like friendship.

Claude had laid in the same bed as me and let me tell him whatever I wanted. He had informed me half of the history I knew of Wonderland, and he had danced with me. He had teased me like a sister and told me stories that I likely shouldn’t have known.

I knew there didn’t need to be a reason for that. And yet, I also knew something else.

The fact that the Crown Court looked at me in a very odd way. One that was different from anyone else.

One that made me stop on the staircase and refuse to go anywhere else without a proper answer from Kaeden. “When I showed up... you all had lasted years without a King of Cards before me,” I remarked at first, slowly remembering the fact that Cornelius had long since passed. “And now, for some reason, the matter is quite pressing,” I said, my mind going to the Caterpillar on the single day I visited him, when he said that I had all the cards, and the people of Wonderland hearing stories of me and telling them as if they were the legacy of a long-gone hero, destined to return.

The question died on my tongue, my mind stopping as I stared back at him, and many things at once began to dawn on me. Things that very likely had not begun to dawn on anyone else—

Because the Crown Court had been waiting for me, and Fitz had very likely been encouraged to bring me to Wonderland. Because Thomas had stopped me from leaving for a reason, and he had told me in the maze of the importance I held. Because the Caterpillar treated me so oddly, with both contempt and fondness, resigning himself to my presence if only in interest of my father; who founded Wonderland with the King of Cards.

And the Crown Court’s power was diminished without a king, and the people were left wanting, and the situation with the Jabberwock had been

set up as an excuse to seize Roisin and leave Chess weakened, and... and...

“Alice, you have to move,” Kaeden hissed, tugging me up two stairs and pushing the small of my back to force me to walk the last one.

In seeing the Jabberwock’s mirror, it had been so easy for Thomas to pin the blame on me without a single member of the courts asking questions. They took his words at face value, because that meant cornering me, and my trial would very likely force someone’s hand and cause a King of Cards to be crowned.

Because even if Kaeden thought he could play the game and feign interest in another, hinting at the possibility of an engagement, it was only with my head on the chopping block that an actual King of Cards would be crowned.

“I’m a pawn,” I muttered as Kaeden pushed me up the final set of stairs and onto the landing, teetering in horror.

“Alice, what are you talking about?” Kaeden asked, furrowing his brows at me as he tried to keep on pulling me along. “We’re nowhere near Chess,” he said, dismissing the thought, but also not entirely realizing what I had.

The Crown Court and all the others had been waiting to use me to force a king. They had manipulated me at every turn to make the need for a King of Cards seem overwhelming, and to pose their ideal Queen; either a queen of Chess, who would unite all of Wonderland, or one who was born of Reginald Grey, the missing piece to the Wonderland royal legacy.

I could scarcely pay attention to Kaeden as he rushed down the hall with my hand in his, his eyes upon the walls, spotting tears within the fabric of so many canvases—almost as if someone had run their claws across them. “He’s been here,” Kaeden said with a glimmer of hope as I struggled to stay standing behind him, and his hand tightened upon mine in what he thought to be reassurance as he looked back at me. “Claude has to be near,” Kaeden said, shooting me a very strained, very practiced smile, as if to reassure me.

As if anything, save for a miracle, could reassure me.

I caught Kaeden’s arm just when he began to relax, scarcely processing the fact that we were at the end of an exceedingly long hallway, and that I knew there to be a tower jutting out of the building that sat beyond the very door he sought to open. I could scarcely think of anything, at that

point, really. Anything aside from a single question, one that escaped my lips too quickly as his eyes slowly moved back to me, confusion showing on his face.

“Kaeden, you and Claude... Claude says it is the responsibility and stress, but what is the real reason you don’t want to be the King of Cards?” I asked, though I had scarcely, if ever, thought to ask such a question before. Especially not when there were other, far more pressing questions at hand, nor when it caused Kaeden to pause so greatly, his brows furrowing further as he squinted at me.

“I thought it was evident,” Kaeden said then, sounding quite concerned by the fact that I did not know. “After what he did to Phineas and my mother, and the way that he was... Alice, my father was not a good man, and to carry his crown... I would have to leave everything behind. My home, my Kingdom, my mother; I would scarcely even have time to check in with her. I wouldn’t be the person I am; I’d be miserable. The only person who has ever wanted to be King of Cards is Fitz, and for some reason, the courts have never seemed too keen on that, and with such a stipulation for succession...” Kaeden trailed off, dismissing the very thought as he turned on his heel and finally twisted the doorknob. “We should find Claude,” he said, finally opening the door as I stared after him, my mind still whirring and my thoughts still spiraling even as he, with a sigh, reached back and pulled me after him.

“The courts will never allow Fitz to be King of Cards,” I murmured to myself as Kaeden tugged me up the stairs after him, finally coming to a conclusion as I knew fairly well exactly why Fitz would never be King of Cards, because he put an end to the first one. And everything Fitz did, even if he played along with the courts, it all was for nothing. They would never let him get that far. The closest he’d ever gotten had caused the Duchess to threaten his title as the King of Diamonds.

The game was only ever between Kaeden, William, and Claude. And none of them wished to win it. None of them wished to take a step closer to the courts and allow the Caterpillar and his cronies to slowly begin to guide their hands. They needed a catalyst, so the Crown Court shoved one down through the rabbit hole and into their world.

“Claude?” Kaeden began to call, his voice loud as we neared the topmost floor of the tower, and the floorboards beneath our feet began to knit themselves back together. “Claude?” He called, and I wondered if he

knew like I did at that moment that the Jabberwock was dead and that the rooms around him were slowly beginning to repair themselves and come back to life because the danger was over, and the Crown Court would have never let the Jabberwock leave anyway.

Just as they would have never let Manon escape. She was their back up plan, after all. But how they would recapture her was a mystery to me, how Claude would pass it all off was a puzzle, and what would happen as a result of this all...

“Claude!” Kaeden called as I shook my head, silently nearing the window and trying to breathe.

Surely it could not all be like that. Surely, it could not all be a conspiracy. That would be ridiculous, unbelievable; impossible, really—

“Claude!” Kaeden yelled more loudly, frantically calling for his brother as he practically turned the room upside down searching for him. “Claude, where are you?” Kaeden said somewhat more frantically, knowing that it was often just like the Cat to appear with a mere utterance of his name, or when you least expected it—and that Kaeden was beginning to expect him to appear less and less then. “Claude, we cannot play these games,” Kaeden said, speaking almost as if he knew that Claude would appear then, he had to appear. Claude always came when Kaeden had called; when anyone called, really, He would always be found laughing out of the corner of your eye, and yet...

Something was wrong. Something was gravely wrong, and I could only barely begin to acknowledge such a thing when I made the mistake of looking out the window, momentarily eyeing a large fire that grew in the distance and knowing what it was— Jaxton was gone, most definitely dead this time.

But Claude?

What could keep the Cat away? Claude always showed up like an unwanted stray at your doorstep. I shook my head at the thought as I pulled away from the window—only to make the incredible mistake of looking down and freezing entirely.

“Claude!” Kaeden called. “Claude!”

But his words fell on deaf ears as I found myself staring down, a sea of white splattered across the pavement staring back at me and stopping all my thoughts as my eyes focused in on a single drop of white upon the ground miles down; a white pawn.

Thousands and thousands of white pawns. “Manon,” I whispered, my voice low and my mind sure of it as I stood there in front of the window, my hands braced upon the windowsill and what remained of my thoughts already expecting what was to happen; the scandalized scream that was to come out from the staircase behind me and the call for guards from the Duchess that set Kaeden scrambling as everything that he had once feared so greatly before seemed to swing into motion right in front of him,

“She pushed her, oh my goodness, she pushed her,” The Duchess called, and because lying is hardly a crime in Wonderland if you double down and manage to never get caught; “I saw her.”

I always knew I hated that vile, dreadful Duchess.

ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN BLUNDERLAND

One could see the exact moment that the light died in Kaeden's eyes. The moment that the Crown Court's lackeys came running, and the Duchess repeated her accusations, all known to be lies, and yet all notably pointless to refute when she was so close to the Caterpillar and had spent much of her life around the courts—the same courts that had already used me, now playing their final hand in one last attempt to force a King of Cards.

And who could be better for such a job than the King of Hearts, whose kingdom had been the last to fall under the previous King of Cards' rule, and whose birth was well known to have been celebrated by Cornelius? Surely, with their history, Hearts would have always been the first to break from their union, and now?

And now Kaeden looked at me with dull eyes, his mind very obviously going back to just minutes prior, when he had begged me to stay in the infirmary. Had I done so...

Had I done so, he wouldn't have shaken his head. Had I done so, his hands wouldn't have trembled. Had I so much as considered it, his shoulders wouldn't have dropped, his calls for Claude all but forgotten as the color leached from his face, body, and clothes, leaving him near white and hardly able to reply even as a victorious smile spread across the Duchess's face and the guards apprehended me, prying me from the window as the realization that Manon was dead, and partially because of me.

Partially because of my one failing, the same one that had resulted in Claude's injuries, in my trial, in everything slowly falling apart. A failing

that, while unplanned, had served the Crown Court well as they used it against me at every turn.

I could not look at Kaeden, nor anywhere else when I felt the heavy iron cuffs clasp upon my wrists, instead choosing to close my eyes and hold my breath, trying to think of far happier things, of the moments of joy that I once had in Wonderland—only to find that so many of them were moments that now let me down, for Claude was gone without a trace when I needed him most, Kaeden most likely despised me, Fitzgerald could no longer look me in the eye, and William?

William had always disappointed me.

“Bad luck, isn’t it?” A familiar voice chuckled in my ear, and I swore my blood pressure spiked as my eyes opened and cut over to him, unsurprised to find Thomas by my side as always as I was led from the room, his hands upon my cuffs as the corner of his mouth rose; already knowing the conclusion to a grand joke that had been played on me as behind the pair of us, negotiations began, ones that would result in a new King of Cards.

And, while I wished to say that I struck him or tripped him, or at least did something—it almost felt as if there was nothing left in me when I let my head fall, failure soaking into my skin as I stood there knowing that, at the end of the day, I didn’t wish to be saved anymore, for all the spite and fire that had once been in me had disappeared with my final, overwhelming decision—

I did not wish for there to ever be another King of Cards.

AN IMMODEST PROPOSAL

The dungeons were dreary, but I suppose one would have expected that, if they were in their right minds and not blinded by the curtain of love. All dungeons were inherently dreary, all dungeons inherently smelled, and all dungeons inherently had small leaks from their ceilings that would drip down onto your face as you laid down on the dirt floor to add to your misery. That was reality.

The many cells that I passed on my way down to the lower most level of the dungeons, were filled with those committing both nonsensical and wholly logical crimes—some making the mistake of wearing the wrong tie on a Friday or failing to match their socks. Others having forgotten to send thank you cards for presents that were dated over seven years old or having gone into their house and turned on the lights on a Sunday—when only the sun was meant to be allowed. They sat in a variety of cells, as one could hardly expect a mouse to board with a cat, or a rat to board with a louse; so, the smaller cells built within pillars along the walls were to be expected, really, as were the larger ones with bars far wider than I was tall that sat in the corners, for those far too large to sit within anything else.

Not many of those cells were empty. Not many of the people within them were happy, either, nor did they greet me very well, considering the fact that word of Alice and how she had caused such tragedies as the Cat's disfigurement and the White Queen's passing spread quickly. I suppose I should have expected it all.

It wasn't a kind reality, nor was my presence in the Heart's lower cells, but I supposed that reality rarely was kind, and that people rarely were offered any sort of breaks, considering the number of times that I had

closed my eyes and wished to be home by then, only to open them and find that Oxford was not staring right back at me at the moment.

It was disappointing, I had to admit it, but I was slowly starting to become more and more pessimistic by the hour.

The fact that Thomas, of all people, was sent to guard my cell did not help much with things, either.

“You haven’t said so much as a word since you were captured,” Thomas complained from the other side of the bars. “I’m starting to think that you’re dead in there or something,” he said, and though he likely meant it to be a subtle statement to only poke fun at me or something of that order, it just made me feel somewhat more ill than I had before, my mind racing to the conclusion that perhaps, I might have been better off dead.

I tried to push the thought away just as soon as I had had it, my whole body feeling somehow sicker at the proposition, as I swallowed and tried to keep any emotions I may have felt down.

“You try mucking everything up every time you so much as move a muscle,” I whispered, rolling onto my side and facing the heavy grey stone that made up the walls of the dungeons of Hearts while not caring above the mud that sat beneath me, nor the thin silt that coated the sleeves and skirt of my once new and far too presentable dress. If anything, I wanted to look worse, because sometimes it was far more preferable to look the way that you felt, especially when you could think of nothing else other than the fact that deep down, you may have been cruel and selfish; just like the Duchess, just like the Caterpillar, and just like the man sitting outside of your cell. The only thing that comforted me was just the slightest, really unimportant win. “At the very least, now those in wonderland will not look at me as if I am some miraculous little girl,” I whispered, because it was very likely that the people of Cards, and the people of Chess as well, would hate me, as the name Alice had now grown into another, far different thing in meaning; the name Alice would now be synonymous with the one who killed the White Queen.

And even if my life was saved and my name was changed, I would always have to wonder if I would still be viewed as such or if eventually, those in Wonderland would grow bored of me and have to make up new cruel rumors to replace that one.

Thomas would likely find good fun in doing so, honestly, coming up with new ways to mar my reputation left and right. It only seemed true to his nature.

“Come now, you must wish to say something,” my guard urged, and I could feel his eyes resting upon me as I laid down in my little patch of mud. “The Cat is gone, Roisin had disappeared from her cell, the Jabberwock is dead, and Manon? Well, Kaeden insists that Manon must have offed herself, but... Don’t you wish to say anything?” He goaded, and I could hear the way that he ran his hands across the bars, causing the hollow echo of the metal to linger in the air. “The whole of Cards is shocked, and soon there will be a new King; doesn’t that make you wish to utter even a single little word? Perhaps a curse or two in my direction?” Thomas chimed as he continued to smack his hand against the bars, perhaps trying to hit out a tune or something of the sort.

I merely stayed silent and focused on the far too complex act of breathing as I laid there, truly having nothing left to say. My father was gone, the Cat had vanished, a queen had passed, and another disappeared—and at the end of the day, if he wished to save my life, Kaeden would become the King of Cards, the only thing that he never wanted to do, and had never asked for from me—and it was all my fault. Every single horror in Wonderland, it was all my fault.

There was nothing left to say and there was nothing left to do, save for begging Kaeden to let me go to the stocks, which I was fairly certain he would never let me do. This was it for me, this was my punishment. I was a foolish, selfish young woman who thought she could tackle any and everything—and this was my consequence. A consequence that most certainly burned more than any that I had ever faced before; more than being made to thread faux flowers onto stems by my grandmother to replace a broken antique or standing nose and knees against the wall at my grandfather’s behest after I had broken his favorite figurine.

This was far worse than any of that, and far worse than I could have imagined, which was why I still did not respond when the tapping came to an end, nor so much as acknowledge him when a split second later, Thomas inhaled sharply once more and slammed his back against the bars. I could not so much as think of a single word to say when blue smoke began to linger in the air, twirling around the room, nor when I heard creaks at the bars, that of a man gripping them.

There was no point in fighting or speaking anymore. The Crown Court had taught me that.

“Don’t you wish to at least lift your head to look at me, Alice?” The Caterpillar’s voice came, as slow and measured as it had always been, even as he taunted me from the other side of the bars, his smoke drifting within my cell and burning my lungs. “Months and months of trouble, and you will not so much as bother to greet me?” The Caterpillar said, likely expecting a glare, or at least a narrowed glimpse in his direction, only to find that whatever remained of that light within me was gone. He had snuffed it out. “Your father would be embarrassed to see you behave in such a way towards me,” the judge informed me, his voice still high and mighty, “the great Alice, wallowing in the mud of a dungeon so far from home; this is not the ending that you should have had,” he goaded, and the only thing I could do was shiver, wrapping my arms around myself and trying to hold myself tighter, if only to feel warmer.

It was hell. That was the simple matter of the fact. Being in the dungeon of Hearts was hell, but perhaps it was a hell I had deserved, as I had never been a good person to begin with.

My only relief was when the smoke stopped swirling, and the Caterpillar paused, at least then I could taste the air, rather than the faint, bitter taste that was always followed by a harsh itch whenever the Caterpillar and his cigar were around. At least then I could take deeper breaths and try to concentrate.

“You won’t be here for long,” the Caterpillar reassured, and his voice was different, softer then, perhaps out of pity. “Negotiations will end with the King of Hearts, and you will be set free, provided you agree not to cause any more trouble after all is said and done,” Erwic stated, his gravelly tone most definitely sounding more strained than before. “It will be a better life for you, better than you would have otherwise, you’ve tarnished the name of Alice—” he said.

“—And whose fault is that?” I spat, my eyes still trained on the wall and my hands still digging into my shoulders. “Whose fault is it that every time I so much as bother to care about anything, it is turned against me and used to the Crown Court’s benefit?” I whispered, but my words, all of them, were lost. They were heard by me alone, and the faint whisper that sounded on the air? That was likely remembered as the passing of the wind

through the bars of the cell as the large, rusted iron door creaked open and the sound of many footsteps filled the air.

Perhaps the Caterpillar did not yet get a good enough look at me before. Perhaps he wasn't satisfied with only the one glimpse. He needed to see me, painted with mud and degraded beyond compare—

"It is unfortunate that you resemble your mother," the Caterpillar said, and I could only shake my head and hold my tongue, for all I could tell him of my mother would never matter to him. "You know, I had a far nicer, more well-mannered woman in mind for your father once, and yet he told me no," Erwic said, as if it truly were some sort of mystery. "She was kind, patient, rational—and yet he wished for some woman from another world, one who Cornelius assured me to be quite the dolt," he said, and I could taste the blood in my mouth from biting down and could feel the tremors in my bones from trying not to move.

Because he knew nothing of Eleanor Grey, and he knew nothing of me.

"It has only ever been my ambition to unite Wonderland," the Caterpillar said, "just as it once was before the looking glass wars, before Chess and Cards came to exchange hands; and while Cornelius did well enough, I often wonder about your father," Erwic stated, and I could hear the shake of his head and the frown on his face, the way that he was so disappointed with it all; the notion of my father of all people choosing some ordinary girl, one who would never come to Wonderland. "He could have done far better than he did," Erwic lamented, his footsteps growing closer and the smoke from his cigar once more hitting the air, only to linger low in the room like a fallen cloud.

I hated him. I had suspected it for a while, but I was fairly certain by then—I hated the Caterpillar with all that I had left, even when he thought that he was doing me a favor, when he thought that he was helping me along—all he ever did was tear me down. All he ever did was destroy me.

"It will be good for you, Alice," The Caterpillar remarked, and yet he knew little of how much I hated him then. "You will come to appreciate me for what I have done, and what I have seen within you," he stated, willing me to look back, to meet his eyes, to give him something for all of his efforts. "The Duchess is no Kingmaker, I can assure you of that," the Caterpillar lamented, shaking his head at the very thought. "But I?" He asked then, sounding quite proud of himself, so proud of himself that I wished I could have told him what that 'dolt' called Eleanor Grey had

once told me; that if you have to congratulate yourself, then have you really done anything of any real use at all?

He likely would have rolled his eyes. He likely would have written it off. He likely would have snorted and let the blue smoke that so irritated the lungs of everyone else float from his nostrils— for he was the picture of arrogance then. One could just feel it linger in the air. It clung around him and left a repulsive, sticky feeling upon your skin like all true arrogance did as, perhaps feeling that he had not humiliated me enough, he set one of his many bandaged feet upon my shoulder and pushed me further into the muck—I never wished to meet someone like that ever again, for the way that he leaned down to whisper in my ear, pillowing my face in a cloud of blue smoke without even a thought for my wellbeing? Was disgusting, but no more awful than the words that he said.

“I am a queen maker,” he wheezed as if it were something to be proud of, and I should have risen to my feet and thanked him rather than bury my face further in the mud, letting it seal the cracks in my lips and fill my nose.

I would never thank him, nor a single member of the courts. I would never thank anyone, especially when his foot was removed from me, his voice coming as a low, severe murmur.

“Your highness,” Erwic said as he turned away from me, and though I felt the mud and dirt vanish from my skin then, I still felt filthy at the very sound of those words and the weight of the eyes that fell upon me.

THE BREAKING OF HEARTS

Kaeden did not say anything initially, though I knew why. It was hard not to know exactly what he was doing as he waited beside the open door of the cell, watching as the Caterpillar strolled by and gave him a toothy smile, showing off his yellow teeth, unoffended by the way that the young king did not so much as bother to return the smile—probably because he knew the reason why. The heavy frown on Kaeden’s face told me just as much.

Kaeden was not happy, though it was likely more with his situation than me if I were to be honest, considering the way that his gaze softened once the Caterpillar had passed and his eyes fell tellingly on me, undoubtedly glad to see that at the very least I managed to collect myself when he came to visit. The Caterpillar had not been graced with me so much as sitting up, so it must have been quite the pleasant surprise for Kaeden to see me waiting there with my knees pressed to my chest and my stare not moving an inch from him, the mud and muck that had been coated upon me vanishing as I couldn’t help but notice that all around me, the cell seemed to improve.

Whether it was Ava or the Courts that had stopped the brown water from leaking from the ceiling, I did not know, but if I had to guess, I would have never thought it to be the Hearts estate. Not then. Ava had some pride in her appearance. She would have never been happy to have a cell in her basement with muddled floors and cracking walls. Therefore, whatever magic maintained the dungeons was a separate kind, likely, or it had initially been something in Ava’s control but she later relinquished it to the Courts when they came to the estate.

Whatever the case, the ground was dry, and that was preferable. As was the leak stopping and the bricks hastily gluing themselves back together—I was impressed by that at the very least, though I was more impressed when Kaeden turned back to the guards standing within the hall of cells, Thomas included, and seemed to dismiss them with a single glance, not so much as gesturing towards them as his hands remained clasped behind his back and his posture stayed stick straight. I almost couldn't believe it when they left, it almost felt like a reminder that he was far too different from me when he was standing there in the doorway all alone, his eyes trailing behind the Caterpillar as Erwic sauntered past the other cells, the Caterpillar's smoke beginning to dissipate from where it had floated high in the ceiling of my room.

It was only when the smoke had completely disappeared and Kaeden had half pulled the cell door shut behind him that I knew we were alone, as he stood there on the other side of the room and took me in, shoulders falling and rising as the tension with which he breathed showed in every fiber of his being.

A part of me wondered if I should say something, though I didn't know what remark to so much as mutter when he was staring back at me, his skin pale and his eyes trailing up and down me, as if taking every detail of my existence and memorizing it. I didn't know if that was his way of saying goodbye, or if he was just making sure that I was in a better state, though he did reveal something as I slowly rose my eyes up to meet his.

"I saw the Caterpillar stand on you," he said quietly, his brows furrowed as he looked my way and concern showed in his features.

"It wasn't much weight," I replied somewhat easily, "it was only a foot, one of many," I shrugged, but made no moves to stand from where I was, instead holding on tightly to my dress and fighting back the dull sting of embarrassment I inevitably felt at the memory of it all, and the pain that lingered upon my realization that the Caterpillar and the Crown Court had won.

I could not help the way that my eyes drifted to the ground, my stomach suddenly dropping at the memory. It was strange, but had he not seen, I might not even have felt ashamed—for I felt fine with everyone else seeing it. But Kaeden...?

Kaeden had always felt different, and it was that spark that lived within me that had drawn him in, wasn't it? Now it was gone. Now, I felt almost

nothing.

Almost.

“I love you,” Kaeden said through the silence, almost as if he were reassuring me at that moment, and to be honest, I was glad to hear it, because a part of me was beginning to doubt the idea that he could so much as look at me after all of this—especially knowing what he had told me to do, and how I had failed him. “Alice, please don’t be upset, it’s not your fault,” Kaeden reassured, and yet I still heard a hint of misery in his tone and how he most definitely did not wish to do what he was going to, the very realization of which only made me feel worse.

I buried my face in my skirt and tried to hold my breath, willing it all to go away, but it did not. Claude had told me all of these magical, fantastical things about Wonderland, and how if you wanted something badly enough, or willed it into existence, then it would always be possible—and yet, there it was. Escaping from this reality? That was impossible. The one, single impossible thing in all of Wonderland.

Even with Kaeden’s hand upon my shoulder and his body kneeling so close to mine, I could not fight back the true misery I felt at the realization of it all and the fact that, at the end of the day, the Duchess and the Crown Court would have had their fun, they’d laugh at me and mock me, and then tell themselves that they did me a favor—but all they did was ruin Kaeden’s life.

All I did, in the end, was ruin Kaeden’s life, and yet there he was, comforting me.

“I know that I told you that you were allowed to cry,” Kaeden said gently as he did his best to pull my shoulders back from my legs and convince me to look at him as his thumbs brushed the tears from the corners of my eyes, “but now is not the time to cry, Alice. Everything will be fine. I promise you, everything will be alright—” Kaeden tried to reassure, but all I could do was shake my head at him, knowing all too well otherwise, as nothing had been alright in a long time, and it never would be.

Not now that I was trapped in Wonderland, and he would be...

“You don’t have to do it,” I tried to inform him as I shook my head and willed the tears to stop—only to come up short. “You don’t have to be the King of Cards,” I tried, but the look on his face said it all, and practically silenced any thoughts I might have had on the matter. “Kaeden, I mean it,”

I tried to argue, attempting to hold his gaze as I did so. “Don’t do this, please, not if it will make you miserable, and most certainly do not do it for me,” I begged between gulps of air, trying to will him into understanding what I was saying. “It is all a lie, and you and I know it is a lie, and at the trial—”

“Alice.”

I shook my head, struggling to explain it to him. “At trial they will prove her wrong, at trial they will know that she lied. It’s her word against yours and mine, they’ll never—”

“Alice.”

“—Kaeden, you’re not listening—” I said, turning to him in full and holding his shoulders as I willed him to understand me. “Kaeden, it’s all going to be alright, it’s all going to be fine, you don’t have to do anything—or if you weren’t to begin with, you don’t have to tell me anything—” I said, because it was always rather presumptuous to assume someone else would put the quality of their life on the line to save you, even if a tiny part of you sort of knew they would. I always wanted to believe that at the end of the day, Kaeden would choose himself over me, over keeping me out of prison or whatever mess I got into.

He deserved better, after all. But the look on his face, the way that his brow furrowed behind his glasses, and the frown tugged heavily on his lips as red sat in the corners of his eyes? That didn’t give me much faith. It didn’t make me believe that he was listening to me. If he could just hear me, if he could just—

“I love you,” Kaeden repeated for the umpteenth time, as if that were some sort of proper response and not just some elaborate joke on his part. I could only shake my head and stare at him. “Alice, I love you,” he repeated, and I did not know why he said it, though there was something about it, and the finality of it all, that made me feel slightly sick, really, like the words had morphed from being ones of affection that never failed to make me smile, to something else. Something awful.

“Don’t say that you love me, just listen to me,” I replied as my hands tightened on his shoulders and I tried to will him to do just that, my head shaking rapidly at him as I looked at the man in awe. “Kaeden, I am telling you now, do not do anything. Do not marry, do not cut any deals, do not become the King of Cards,” I murmured, not so much as caring about much else. I couldn’t give a damn if dirt floors and leaky ceilings were all

that awaited me. “Be happy,” I begged, “and trust that soon I will be happy as well,” I said, though he very evidently did not believe me, as was evident by the way that he shook his head at it all, and seemed to dismiss my statements, instead deciding to tell me something unrelated entirely.

“I’m proud of you,” he said, as if this were the time or place, even though we both knew it not to be, and I had to fight back my frustration at the very sound of that statement. “Alice, I am very, very proud of you.”

I didn’t know how to react to that, confusion and concern was growing inside of me and nestling in the pit of my stomach as I looked at Kaeden, almost not believing him to be himself at all, considering the flat, near broken way that he was speaking, and the way that, upon seeing me reach for his face, he took advantage of the motion to instead grab the underside of my arm and pull me up, the quiet, look of contemplation upon his face leaving me far more worried than I had been before. I was near terrified, and yet, he was barely even phased at all, and seemed to have no issues steadying himself as he took me in once more, his hands tightening upon me and his jaw tensing as he sought to read my features. He took a deep breath, but I felt more like he had stolen the air from my lungs instead as his lips parted and he tried and failed once again to find the right words to say to me, only prompting me to reply to his initial statement.

“I have done nothing to be proud of,” I said slowly, my hands still lingering so close to his face, but the distance still feeling like too much.

“You have done plenty to be proud of,” Kaeden countered as he looked at me, genuine sadness brimming behind his eyes. “Alice, you are only in this situation because you were worried about Claude, and it is my fault —”

“—It is not your fault—”

“—I did not give you answers,” Kaeden stated with a sort of finality. “I did not tell you what you needed to know, and I could not guarantee anything for you, that is not your failing,” Kaeden reassured, leaning into the hand that cupped the side of his face as he looked upon me with a sort of pity. “Alice, you have many good traits. I have told you this before.”

“I am stubborn, I am pigheaded, I am rude, I am brash—” I refuted, wishing that it was not the truth but knowing far too well that it was, even as Kaeden denied and denied the way that I was.

“You are the only person who has ever questioned anything here,” Kaeden tried to argue against me, his hands firmly remaining on top of

mine.

“Because it did not suit me!”

“Because you are brave, and smart, and determined, and far too many things that you refuse to acknowledge,” Kaeden reassured me, and I could not tell if he was lying to me to make me feel better, or if that was how he truly felt. “Alice, I believe that you are inherently a good person,” he said, his voice so firm and demanding that it almost dared me to say otherwise. “I believe that while things do not always turn out right for you, and you do not always think everything through, your heart is in the right place, and the few mistakes you make are only because you had no other options,” Kaeden continued, shaking his head at me as his hands finally dropped from mine, only to bunch into fists at his side. “I am remarkably jealous of you and how outspoken you manage to be,” Kaeden declared, staring at me and silently willing me to understand him, even when that felt like such a far off and outlandish concept to me. “You do not have to be like me or anyone else to be a good person, Alice,” Kaeden told me, pleading with me to see his point of view. “You just see when something is wrong and you try to fix it,” he stated, trying to explain to me how it all worked, this mythical idea of being a person who was worthwhile, someone who was good and wholesome, who was worthy of all the trouble they caused.

I might have agreed with him several months prior, but that was far too long ago, and now I was cursed to see what I had done to him and everyone else. Now I was cursed to face the facts, the facts being that I had ruined his life and just about everyone else’s around him. He would have never have had to become King of Cards if he hadn’t met me, he would have never had to go through this at all; he would have been able to live his life as it was before and be happy.

“Alice, I swear to you, I do love you. I love you far too much,” he willed me to understand. “I love you to the point of insanity, to the point of irrationality, to the point where I need nothing else,” Kaeden stated, not so much as disheartened by the way that my hands dropped from his skin, nor the fact that I stepped back from him. If anything, it all only made him more determined. “I cannot live without you, Alice,” he stated with utmost conviction, and I believed him. I wished I could open his eyes and make him see that, make him realize that I was not a good person for him to be around anymore.

The only way I could do so was by ending it all. That was the most obvious path, the most obvious way to save him. “Kaeden, I can’t do this anymore, I don’t think that any of this is a good idea,” I tried to argue, but my words only fell on deaf ears, Kaeden had no interest in listening to them.

“I love you, and I know that you love me,” Kaeden dismissed, almost daring me to say otherwise but only giving me a single second to refute his claim. “I know what you’re going to try, and I’m not going to let you do that,” Kaeden said, his voice steady and unmovable, as if he almost dared me to try again, if only to further make me aware of his resolve. “I need you to listen to me,” he told me, not so much as risking looking away from me, almost as if he was sure that I would try to escape. “Please,” he whispered, and I knew in my mind that if I so much as thought of stepping away from him, he would stop me.

He had already proven that there was little I could do to sway him when it came to the two of us at that point. There was no way that he was giving up on me. All I could do was stand there and wait, knowing all too well that he would not listen to me and do what was best for me, and for what? For what seemed to be nothing at all to me. A trial would happen, the Duchess would be proven wrong, I would spend some time in the dungeons, but I would be none the worse for it.

Or so it seemed. I found out otherwise when I finally decided to remove my hands from his face, flinching as he only took the fleeting touch to be an encouragement to step closer to me and make me fully aware of the fact that he was there, and he was there to stay.

“I often forget that you are not like me, and that you have not always been in Wonderland,” Kaeden admitted, flinching at the very thought of how detached from his reality I truly was in the end, even if I were surprised to hear he had thought of me as being a part of it all. “You have always fit in in your own special way, Alice. You have always managed to figure things out and no one gives you credit for it. You’ve managed to navigate most of this world with a good deal of ease. Not all, mind you, but,” Kaeden paused, his lips pressing into a thin line at the thought as he seemed to reaffirm to himself that I belonged there, that I was always meant to be in Wonderland in some regard. “I wonder what it is like in England sometimes,” he remarked, his voice light as if he actually contemplated it here and there. “I wonder what world you grew up in, and

what the people around you were like,” he admitted, having no idea how badly I wanted to say the same to him. “More often than I would care to admit, I remind myself of facts that I am all too certain you already know, only to find you mystified by the concept of unbirthdays, calling cards, and such simple notions as Doors,” he said, and I really did want to open my mouth to refute him then, because doors were not an entirely fair concept there, as there were doors where I came from.

But then I reminded myself that most concepts that I knew in my world were completely different in Wonderland and chose to stop myself, leaving him to chuckle as he most definitely saw my lips part to interrupt him before deciding it was best to do otherwise. At the very least, I seemed to provide him an almost welcome break as he waited for me to speak, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips as he stood so patiently in anticipation of a response, only not to get one at all.

I think he wished I did speak though, considering the way that his faced changed when he realized that I would say nothing at all, the corner of his lips falling and a sort of dread seeming to settle over him as he inhaled deeply and carefully considered his next words. The most unfortunate thing of all, however, was that sometimes, there never really was a way to say something difficult. Sometimes, there never was a way to explain something at all, not in the quiet, well-mannered sort of way that Kaeden would have preferred. I could tell that he struggled with it as his mouth opened and closed over and over again, the words perching on the tip of his tongue, but never finding their way out.

“Alice, trials are not as you know them to be in England, not here, not in Wonderland,” Kaeden begged me to understand, speaking so quickly that I could barely hope to get another word out before he continued barreling on. “Serious trials. Not trials like yours... or rather, I suppose, your original one. In cases such as this one, people rarely prefer to wait for any sort of verdict,” Kaeden said, grimacing as my nose wrinkled and I tilted my head. “In the matter of murder in Wonderland, it is sentence first, verdict later,” Kaeden said, as if that made any sort of sense, or was any way for a courtroom to behave. I almost didn’t believe him. In fact, I didn’t believe him at all, really.

Because how could such an awful, unfair, and wholly cruel system exist? How could anyone stand for it?

The answer was for entertainment, of course. Because that was half of Wonderland, wasn't it? The theatrics?

"Then I will sit in a cell for a matter of years, that does not bother me, Kaeden," I said, though the look on his face as I said it informed me that it very much bothered him, and that he would never like to think of such a thing again. "Kaeden, it is alright, it will be fine, I am begging you," I pleaded, reaching for his hand and trying not to choke at the hesitant way that he took mine. "You don't need to do this," I reassured him, willing him to understand. He had been running from this his whole life, and that meant something.

And yet he was so reluctant to listen to me, and too cautious to take my hand. For a moment, I didn't think that he would touch me at all, but then he took that last, final breath, and looped his fingers through mine, his grip squeezing me perhaps a bit too tightly, but I could hardly pay attention as his eyes watered, and he struggled to speak to me. Kaeden only managed to get one word out after swiping his eyes with the back of his palm, just as quickly trying to wipe the tears that fell from existence.

"Alice," he said, his voice heavy with remorse as his shoulders dropped in a way that made me wish to throw my arms around him and pull him against me. "Alice, you have to marry me," he proclaimed, and no sooner had my lips parted than he shook his head rapidly, silencing any words that might have come out. "Alice, I need you to do this," he stated, as if no were never an option for me. "You are the only way that I can bear this life," Kaeden said, his hand holding mine so tightly that I neared pain. "I won't be happy without you, I can't be happy without you," he whispered, willing me to understand, though really, I never had any hope of doing so. Not then, not with a proposal like that.

Not when he was shaking and looked terrified out of his mind.

"—Kaeden, what is happening to you?" I remarked, the whole world seeming to stop at the sight of him and the way that he trembled, at the true fear in his eyes and the way that he regarded me— as if I were something simple and fragile. "Kaeden, what did they tell you?" I pressed, my voice coming out slowly as I raised my hand to his cheek without hesitation, the worry practically stabbing me to my core as he did not speak, and instead leaned once more into my touch.

But the way that he leaned was so different, so desperate. His wide eyes did not move from mine, nor did he so much as glimpse away. He

simply stared at me, willing me to know.

“Say yes,” he said, shaking off my reluctance as he pressed a frantic kiss to my hand. “Please just, Alice, say yes. I will be good to you; I will be kind. I will do whatever it is that you want—”

“Kaeden, tell me what is going on,” I demanded, but was silenced as he continued to rattle on, seemingly oblivious to my questions.

“—I will not make you upset, I promise you. I will take care of you, and I will kiss you every day, I will hold you tight, and I will never make you wonder, you will always have me—”

“Kaeden.”

“—And if in the end you do not wish for me, that is fine, I will do my best to look away,” he stated, wincing at the very thought but saying it all the same, even if I could not stand to hear another word and so bluntly yanked him down to face me, the horror apparent on my features as I took him in.

He was terrified, well and truly terrified. His skin was so cold he was freezing over, his face was near moss green, and his eyes were so wide one could not ignore the way that they grew red as he held back tears. Someone had told him something, something that had made him scared, this wasn't like Kaeden at all—It was almost as if he were losing his grip on reality and did not wish to look at me at all as I forced him to do so. My thumb brushed up the side of his glasses, lifting the frames from the bridge of his nose, but still, he looked green.

“Kaeden,” I breathed, trying to get him to inhale and exhale just the same as I willed him to tell me what was wrong.

And then he said it, the one thing that would terrify him. The one lasting memory that he would always have; just reflected by a different situation at a different time and in a different place.

“Alice, I have to marry you, I'm the only one who'll do it, and it's the only way that this will all go away. The courts will not simply put you away,” he said. “They want your head.”

THINKING AHEAD

I had never really considered the subject of my head.

Perhaps that was wrong of me, considering the weight of Kaeden's arms as he wrapped them around me and pulled me close to his chest, seeming to hold on to me as if I alone could be the sole thing to save him from drowning in this situation, when really, I felt like I was drowning myself.

I suppose I thought my head to be rather nice, and well suited to where it sat. I should have hated for it to go elsewhere, and I should have liked for it to remain as pleasantly perched as it always had been. To be honest, before that moment, the concept of me losing my head had come up quite a bit, and I had thought that I'd considered it properly before, but I suppose that I hadn't. Likely because Claude didn't give it as much weight as Kaeden did then, and Fitzgerald himself rarely wished to discuss the matter. William had heard of me losing my head once or twice, but was, always, so utterly consumed by his own life that I was fairly certain that he should have rarely, if ever so much as thought of the topic.

But there it was, a topic that was treated as if it were very real for once, rather than a vague threat. A concept that made me shiver within Kaeden's arms, the whole of my life flashing before my eyes and actually, honestly, being a little interesting if I were to be honest with myself. Though I supposed Kaeden shouldn't have wanted to hear anything about how peculiar I found it all as he pulled away from me.

I supposed Kaeden shouldn't have wanted to hear anything but the word yes as he backed away from me, his breathing almost as heavy as the sound of guards' footsteps on the stone floors as he looked down at me,

silently begging me to understand. “I haven’t a ring, nor have I had the foresight to collect my card to give it to you,” Kaeden said, frantic yet sincere. “But I will, I promise,” he said, giving me a grave look as he regarded me with not a single ounce of humor in his eyes. “I have already planned to give you the rest of my life, Alice,” he said, steadying himself on my shoulder. “I just need you to say yes,” he said, as if that were such an easy thing to do, as if agreeing to marry someone knowing that you could very well ruin their life was all that simple.

I wish it were. I wish it were easier for me to say yes at that moment, for me to not think that I had wholly ruined him; but I couldn’t. I couldn’t do it to him. At the most, I could only allow him one small victory.

“I love you, Kaeden,” I said, with utmost honesty, because I did. I most definitely did.

And when he took it as a yes and swept me up into his arms? When he lifted me up off my feet with frantic breaths and pressed his lips firmly into mine? When his mouth moved and his eyes closed and his very being willed me to understand why exactly it was that he had to do such things? I knew that I could not marry him, that I could never do it to him. I could never make him the King of Cards; I could never ruin Kaeden like that.

Not when he pulled back for only a breath before pressing his lips into mine and kissing me again, not when his hands sat firmly around my waist and pressed me into the warmth of his chest, not when his touch was both firm and fleeting with the understanding that if he pushed me too far, I might break.

His first touches were quick and far too brief, as if he were afraid that I was not kissing him back when I most certainly was and as if he worried that I did not want him when I most certainly did. I would always want him. I would always wish to be with him, and I willed him to understand that as I looped my arms around his neck and tried to still the onslaught.

I loved him. I loved the feel of his lips against mine, I loved the way that he held onto me, I loved the fanaticism of his kiss and the way that he embraced me with such excessive passion at first that I could almost trick myself into believing that he was truly excited about it all. Almost.

It was far harder to remind myself that this was a terrible, awful thing that was meant to be dreaded when his kisses slowed and became more drawn out, his lips lingering on mine simultaneously too long and too short as he tried to still his shaking hands and kiss me as he should.

The guilt made me feel almost sick.

I wanted to picture an imaginary land in which he became the King of Cards and I the queen, and we eventually found a way to be happy; but then I looked around me at the cell that I stood in and remembered the estate sitting just upstairs. I remembered his mother, his life, his land... and it just kept reaffirming the realization that I could not take it all away from him. I could not cut up Kaeden like that and serve him on a plate to the Crown Court, not when he had so obviously avoided it for so long for a reason—fearing what would happen when he left home and abandoned his mother in the process.

And yet I also could not break his heart, even as the Court Guards arrived and waited, finally coaxing Kaeden to step away from me, the very withdrawal of his touch seeming to be something that he dreaded as he allowed his fingers to linger against my skin while he pulled back, dragging lines across my cheeks. Kaeden did not so much as blink as he looked at me. He did not so much as humor the notion of looking away, even as the guards stared from the sidelines and would likely inevitably begin to gossip. He just lingered there, standing in front of me and not wanting to let go.

“I love you,” I reaffirmed in a whisper, because that is what he most definitely needed to know, and yet it did little to calm the man. The only thing that did that was wrapping my arms around him and pulling him close. “I love you,” I repeated into his shoulder as I tightened my grip around him and willed him to know that it was true. “Kaeden, I love you so much,” I said, knowing that was all I could give him. I would have to think of an extraordinarily stupid plan not to die, and...

And it hurt so badly to think that this may have been goodbye, that this was an end to me and him. This was it. This was the finale. Hopefully.

One could only hope that there would be far less pain and suffering ahead as I placed my hand on his cheek and kissed him, pressing my lips firmly against his jaw as I tried to memorize his features in that one single moment. Peach colored lips, dark eyes that sat behind heavy frames, three moles, and a roundness to his cheeks that would make him look forever young, despite the months he had on me. Lanky legs, a towering height, and a slimness that made it easy to wrap my arms around his waist and bury myself within him, only to inevitably find the firmness of muscles beneath his skin. I would remember him. I would remember his long yet

entrancing fingers, his hard-won smiles, and the humor that he so seldom doled out. He would always be mine, just like that, the person who I loved more than anything.

Perhaps the only person with the patience for me anymore.

“Tomorrow,” Kaeden promised as he pulled away, nodding at me before I could so much as agree before his eyes cut to the door. “Tomorrow at sunrise,” he said, pressing a final, hasty kiss to my cheek as he finally moved away from me, his nerves evident in the quick way that he moved towards the door, scarcely even looking at the guard as he left me.

No, Kaeden’s final goodbye was a single, parting glance, one with a strained smile manufactured to reassure me that everything will be alright. One that I tried to return and was successful at, really, even as my mind raced forward and my heart sunk lower and lower, with nary an end to my suffering in sight.

But that is when I saw him.

Not Kaeden, for I watched him until he vanished from sight. I would have been hard pressed not to notice him.

But the guard who stood at the door to my cell as Kaeden finally left? The one whose gaze lingered on me with the slightest silent laugh? The one who shook his head and dismissed me with a roll of his eyes?

That was the moment that I saw Thomas, and that was the moment that I formed the most awful, ungodly plan.

THE EXCHANGING OF NAMES

I had come to accept the fact that sometimes I had to do things that I most definitely did not want to at that moment, things that would never really benefit me, but could protect someone else. That was a part of love, the desire to keep someone else happy, even if it meant hurting yourself; and if I knew one thing, most definitely, it was that I loved Kaeden far more than was reasonable, and much, much more than I loved myself. Few people would ever believe me in that fact, but it was true.

Just as it was true that being the King of Cards would undoubtedly ruin him, and that Kaeden could not see me be decapitated, he would not survive it. Not after watching the previous King of Hearts pass, nor having seen what his stepfather's execution did to his mother. He would never be the same if I allowed it to happen.

But I would also never be free if my name remained the same.

A hollow breath escaped me as my eyes fell upon Thomas, my mind too clearly remembering the Caterpillar and how he had told me I'd ruined my name. With my father gone, my name was all that I had and all that Thomas ever really cared about, for what claim did he have to a throne that was never his to begin with if he had no lineage?

But what could he gain from me when my reputation and credibility were already so far gone?

I watched Thomas as the faint echoes of Kaeden's steps grew quieter, and the man I loved traveled further and further away from me as I thought of the unthinkable— another way.

Because even if he had nothing else, Thomas had a name that someone like me— someone in need of change in order to escape conviction—

could very well use. Alice Grey was being charged, but not Alice Caard. The only problem would be convincing the man.

Thomas did not have a title or land or anything else; not anymore, though helping me would likely be a total forfeiture of any ill-gotten gains he might have been line for from the Caterpillar, and he was so, so close to regaining his title.

Or so they told him, at the least, but by then, he had probably learned to trust them just as little as I had. The chance of this being the one deed that would get him back into the Crown Court's graces... It was low, as I could not imagine them letting Thomas go. Not when he was so handy as a guard and would likely always have a magical inclination and a distinct closeness to the royal family. It was very likely that he would be as stuck as I was, and he had to know that. The look on his face as he glimpsed back at me and caught me staring convinced me that he knew something he would never tell me nor anyone else, as the corner of his mouth rose in good humor and the eyes I had once thought so handsome sat alight.

"Are you watching me, Alice?" he asked with ever the laugh lingering just behind his breath as he cocked his head at me in question, his motions just flirtatious and carefree enough to catch me off my guard. "My, you could cause a scandal with that gaze," he said jokingly, likely unaware of how close his statement really was to my true intentions.

My eyes moved to the bars that he stood in front of, only spotting one other guard; one that was hardly paying attention at the moment for all he cared about was the grand romance book he was reading. I didn't know whether or not to be insulted by that, considering the fact that he was sitting in a chair directly outside my cell as the likely replacement for one of my three guards, and he hardly seemed to blink an eye in my direction. At least Thomas was somewhat awake and mobile, even if he was... well, Thomas.

But then again, I suppose I did not possess magic, and few likely thought it possible for me to figure out exactly what it was what made the fantastical things in Wonderland work. It was simply intuitive for the people who lived in Wonderland, but not for someone like me. But I supposed... well, I could use my own ignorance to my benefit, couldn't I?

"I hardly meant to stare," I informed the Joker, trying to keep my voice as cutting and curt as it had been since Thomas's initial betrayal, lest he figure out what I was up to before I had officially decided upon doing it.

“I’m debating asking a question,” I informed Thomas, because I was, though the way that I said it made it sound almost as if I were hesitant to ask him of all people—which I most certainly wasn’t. Not when the mere suggestion of a question made his brow lift in interest and his head cock further to the side.

He was predictable in that regard. Any chance he had to laud his position as a high-ranking citizen of Wonderland over me, he would take. I had long since realized that, while Claude was often overjoyed when he found things I didn’t know, and Kaeden treated the matters with patience and civility; Thomas was a wholly different beast.

Half of the time, I could not tell if he was lying or not, and I was often too unsettled by his casual, carefree demeanor to question the validity of his statements to his face. Especially when it meant looking at him longer than needed.

Something about the way Thomas could seem so normal and yet be so deceptive frightened me, though I would hardly admit that to anyone. Largely out of fear of being overheard by him, really, as he seemed to hear and know everything that happened in Wonderland a good deal of the time, and even as he popped into my cell to stand directly in front of me, I could not help but wonder if he already knew what I would ask him.

I chose to tell myself that he did not, largely because I found that made it easier to speak to him. Pretending that he was just another normal guard made it easier to be around him—on the few occasions when I was capable of doing so.

Largely when he did not stand too close to me, looming over me as an assortment of freckles and tousled hair. His hazel eyes danced with interest as he looked down at me, the corner of his mouth lifting on only one side as if he were making an effort to hide his smirk.

The distance between us startled me for a moment, and it took far too long for me to step back from him, my body almost seeming to seize up immediately as he stood in my way. He said nothing in response to this, of course, but I could tell that he wanted to. So many statements and observations always lingered on the edge of Thomas’s tongue, especially now that he had been effectively muzzled by the Crown Court. Even so, I chose to trust him.

Still, I chose to stand there, considering him, my nerves spiking higher and higher as I took him in, and the far less than subtle realization that

Kaeden would be angry with me when he figured it all out hit me.

Kaeden would likely never forgive me, and yet...

There would be far more chances for him to be happy if he were not the King of Cards, the position instead being allowed to stay open for a few more years. The Crown Court would likely still hate me, but I did not care about them in the slightest. I could not damn Kaeden to suffering.

"Marriage, in Wonderland," I said slowly, because marriage was a rather complex thing no matter where you went, and there were always ceremonies and rituals involved. I did not expect Wonderland to be any different. "How does it work?" I asked, and I was surprised at how quickly and easily I was able to pose the question, as if I had wondered it for a far longer time, rather than only the few minutes since I had been forced to truly regard such a thing.

Thomas's lack of surprise was anything but unexpected. He was the Court's lackey, after all, and he likely knew exactly what Kaeden had been sent to do when he waved the guards away. The only thing he didn't know was my true intentions at the moment—or so I thought. The way that he spoke almost convinced me that he did.

"How topical of you," Thomas said with nary a blink, his tone far too knowing as his eyes scanned me up and down, perhaps trying to fully decipher what I was thinking. I remained as still as possible just in case, careful not to so much as move a muscle, lest he figure me out. "I'm glad to hear that you're finally considering your future in Wonderland," Thomas said with just a hint of venom, which should have irritated me really, but steadied me instead, because at the very least, he did not know what I had said to Kaeden in Spades. He did not know that I had considered staying.

What he did know was that my shoulders relaxed at his brief little barb, which he seemed to catalogue in the back of his mind as I took another step back from him, willing myself to believe that he could look like a normal man then. I think I had spent so long hating him that my perception of who he was had morphed entirely. There had to be something that Claude saw, aside from the bitterness. Just a hint of light.

I had once thought him to be far too gorgeous, I supposed, and if I tried, I could still see that in his sun kissed skin and ever pleasant dimples. I had also enjoyed his laugh, and the fact that he seemed to be there for me... though that wasn't the truth, was it? Not when he was working with

the Crown Court from the start, only to be further trapped into his dealing with them as a result of his actions towards me that fateful day in the maze when he had effectively locked me in Wonderland.

Perhaps they had something on him, perhaps they knew something about him that I didn't. Something ridiculous, it was likely, considering the fact that Wonderland hardly had any normal laws, other than ones that made up the core tenets of every society.

It would have made sense, but I'd never bothered to ask him. Remembering that fact, I was willing to step forward just a single foot, a feat that made Thomas raise a brow in amusement, and also encouraged him to begin his explanation. Though, I suppose an overall rundown would have been far better than what he did then, stepping towards me with a hint of a dare glimmering in his eyes as he met my question with one of his own.

"How do you think that it works, Alice?" Thomas posed, only causing me to frown before he provided the slightest non-explanation. "There are far too many groups within the Kingdoms of Chess and Cards, and far too many traditions within them, I could never hope to explain them all, could I?" He said, and though I admittedly had not thought of that, I was irritated all the same.

"Surely there is some similarity between them all," I said, furrowing my brows at the man in frustration as he slowly began to move about my cell, his footsteps falling into more of a saunter as he behaved like he was far too concerned with everything else, acting as if he had so much as cared about my state of living in the past few hours. I knew it was just another performance he put on to either attempt to disarm me, or needle me—but I couldn't tell which, nor could I point it out to him when he acted as if the topic I had specifically asked about was so boring and unremarkable that he should think to look at the rubble upon the ground in my cell with far too much interest rather than answering my questions. "How is it all legally bound?" I asked, because at the heart of all marriages in England was one thing at the very least—paperwork.

Paperwork was probably one of the few certainties of life, and I supposed there had to be some sort of record keeping in Wonderland to be sure that everything was in order. I just needed him to tell me.

Actually, it wasn't even that which I mentally begged him to tell me at that moment. All I wanted him to do was assure me that in doing this, in

somehow convincing him, he would not get to lock me away or do something even more awful. If I could simply be allowed to retire to the Clocktower and remain alone, maintaining Home until the end of eternity, I would consider that good enough. Not an excellent way of living, mind you, but a good enough one.

I could survive things that were considered good enough, I thought. I was certain that I could survive Thomas Caard, at the very least. I had done it many times before with much more to lose. I should have been able to do it then too, when Thomas was no longer the Joker, and I was no longer the Alice of legend. It would only make sense.

Strangely, Thomas's words only made sense too. I hadn't been expecting that.

"It's simple," Thomas said, his voice low and measured as he meandered about the room, inspecting the piece of rubble he had picked up and acting as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. "In order to marry in Wonderland, you only need a few things," he stated, still feigning interest in the rock, but failing to convince me as his eyes slowly drifted up, taking advantage of my intrigue to capture my gaze entirely and allow the hazel within his eyes to draw me in further and further. "First, you need a ring," he said with a shrug, acting as if it were par for the course, really. "Then," he said, his voice trailing on and drawing out every sentence, "you would need a groom. Say you were to marry me, per chance," he said, the corner of his mouth curling up in a way that almost immediately made me want to be sick.

"Per chance," I reiterated with emphasis, eyeing him suspiciously.

"A truly beautiful union, really, one between the two biggest crooks in all of Wonderland," Thomas chimed, causing me to swallow as I continued to watch him; a small part of me wishing to say that I was no crook, not at the end of the day, but knowing better than to argue about it. "You would be a most beautiful bride, and I the most dashing groom," he stated, making me more than certain that he was drawing it out for laughs, or something of the sort.

My eyes narrowed and he must have seen, because I heard his low laugh and watched as his head fell back, the man giving me a lazy smile as he looked at me over his shoulder.

"English people opt for vows, but those are not popular in Wonderland," Thomas told me, leaving me glad to know that, at the very

least, I didn't need to pledge my love for him, or anything. "Really, there's only two important things other than the ring when I think about it," Thomas said, feigning surprise as he tapped his lip in thought and seemed to consider it all, lingering far too long on the topic.

"Oh, get on with it," I said, because I would scarcely allow myself to be teased a moment longer. Even if it did seem to amuse him. I was not his toy to play with, after all, nor was I his giggling bride, even if he preferred to act like I was.

I would never love him, that much I was sure of. Perhaps that was what irritated him, as even as he moved closer to me, I did not respond. I did not give in to his attempts to inspire something within me; I was not that person anymore, he had put an end to her, and half the time I hardly felt like a person at all. Especially not then.

It made no sense for him to linger in front of me, allowing the rubble to tumble from his hands as he looked down at me. But I supposed that, in mere moments, he would claim that I made no sense either, as I did what I had to and asked him to marry me and save not only my head, but Kaeden as well.

"Well, Alice," Thomas said, his eyes gleaming almost as if he were expecting it all. "At the end, you would kiss me, of course. That's something that I think the English and the Wonderlanders agree upon," he stated, raising a brow at the way I stiffened at the statement, having not very well considered that portion at all. Honestly, a part of me was almost hoping that, as it was Wonderland, the concept wouldn't exist.

I was a fool, truly.

I couldn't even deny it then, as I stared up at Thomas and thought, for a single moment, that perhaps it would have been nice to kiss him. Perhaps, if I closed my eyes and pretended otherwise; that he was not the groom, and I was not the bride, and I did not exist in such a hellish portion of Wonderland—maybe then it would have been nice. I wasn't sure.

What I was sure of was that Thomas had stated the order of what had to happen in an irregular sort of fashion on purpose, for what other means would he have for withholding what was to come before the kiss then? Whatever it was, he was fond of it, or at least of the reaction he expected it would garner.

Truthfully, when he said it, I did not initially know how to react. Largely because it had seemed so normal and astonishingly average then

that it caught me off guard, for I almost expected marriage in Wonderland to be such a thing of strangeness, that I would hardly be able to recognize it at all.

“And then, you would take my name,” Thomas said, and I had to fight not to grimace at the very thought of it. This was my idea, after all, I should not have winced at the notion of taking his name instead of keeping my own—that was the point of even considering marrying him in the end.

Caard. Alice Caard. It sounded frighteningly irregular, for I had been Alice Grey all of my life, and in some ways, it was only in that last name that I still felt close to my father.

“Don’t be concerned, for I would hardly expect you to take a whole name from me, nor even more than a few letters. You needn’t change your name to Thomas, or add Caard onto the end of your last name. Nor would I expect you to do a bold sort of change like becoming Alicemas or Tholice—those would be awful names to begin with. Just an initial is enough for most marriages, though it is considered rather romantic to take a whole middle or last name. Some people think the more of your name your spouse has taken, the more they love you,” Thomas said as I grew stiff in front of him, the sight alone causing his smile to widen to an unbelievable extent. “As I said, I would not expect you to take much of my name to add onto yours, nor make drastic changes. What is your full name by the way?” He asked, and I don’t know why, but I lied.

“Alice Jane Grey,” I said, though that wasn’t quite true, and I wasn’t quite sure why I said it. My middle name was Emily, because my mother had a fondness for the book *Wuthering Heights*, and my father had a fondness for not arguing with her.

I almost regretted my decision as Thomas looked me up and down with a widening grin, leaving me to wonder if he knew that the name was a lie. It was very possible, as my father likely told people many things, and I could hardly imagine him keeping something like my name a secret—or at least, he wouldn’t have done so in England.

Time and time again, I had to remind myself that this was Wonderland. Time and time again, I had to remind myself that Wonderland was far different from any place I had ever known before, and concepts that existed in sensible locations such as England could scarcely persist in Wonderland then.

More than that, the Reginald Grey that had inhabited Wonderland had been a slightly different man than my father as I had known him. A man who had his hands in politics and all manners of things, rather than fatherhood and education. Who knew what rules he adhered to?

And if Thomas knew of the lie, he didn't say anything. In fact, he hardly said much initially, letting my name linger on the air between us in the damp, musty cell almost as if it were a revelation. An incorrect revelation that I should have rectified immediately, really, but for some reason couldn't. I could only watch Thomas as he considered it, while seeming to evaluate me differently.

"Alice Jane Grey," Thomas breathed, and no sooner had he said it than I shut my mouth, not eager to correct him as he sauntered closer to me, leaving me with the choice to either step back or stand still as he neared me.

To move was to admit guilt and fear. I would not do that. I would not tell him of my lie, even as he watched my reaction closely, regarding me with barely disguised interest.

"Thomas J. Caard, two As in the surname," Thomas provided, hardly missing a beat. "I'm fond of As, and I would take the A from Alice and make it my own," Thomas informed me as he took a step nearer, bending his head down to whisper in my ear, "You would still be Alice, for marriage is far more about sharing than taking, I would simply use the A as well, or really any part of your name that I fancy to claim as my own—but if it were me, I should like to take the A. It's a most valuable vowel, if you ask me. The 'A' in your name is perhaps the most noteworthy in all of Wonderland," he said, as if the 'A' in my name were any different than an 'A' written any other way.

The subject of names and the keeping and taking of them was rather odd, and difficult to wrap my head around, if I were being honest with myself. I could not disagree, though I wished I could. There was no way that I could contest the thievery, as I imagined that he would laud his position over me when the time came.

And so I played along.

"Alice J. Grey," I said instead, telling him a name using a part of his as well. It was evident that he would ask what portion I would take eventually anyway, and with this, I cut his gloating in half. "I would take only the J," I said, for truly, I could not will myself to have taken anything else. "Alice

J. Grey,” I said, closing my eyes at the somewhat insulted snort that Thomas made in response.

“Would you take more or less of someone’s name if it were anyone else?” Thomas pressed, raising his brow as he looked down at me. I did not respond.

I did not think that piece of information was his to know.

He disagreed.

He disagreed so wholly that he took one last step forward far too quickly, the sudden motion causing me to widen my eyes and just as suddenly step back, unable to bear it anymore. The moment that I tried to back away, however, I found myself questioning reality, as I managed to only edge my foot back by a single inch before hitting the cold, stone walls of my cell, the ones that I had sworn sat so far behind me before. I told myself that I had slowly approached them as I stepped back, but even then...

Even then Thomas blocked my view as my eyes went to the hall, obstructing the sight of a single empty wooden chair before I could so much as process it, his features schooled into an expression akin to concern as Thomas looked at me almost like he was worried.

A part of me wasn’t sure if he was capable of such a thing. Caring for others did not seemed typical of Thomas.

“Come now, you should wish to tell me,” Thomas said. “After all, isn’t that the goal of marriage, for two people to tell each other everything?” He posed, almost as if it were a real marriage we were to have, his voice so low and insistent as he spoke to me. “You do wish to marry me, don’t you, Alice?” He asked, and he knew. He absolutely knew, and he was posing this as his single demand.

The only thing he would want before he would say yes. Something seemingly small and easy to give, rather than what I assumed he would ask of me; something large and impossible. I could only stare.

A part of me knew that it shouldn’t have felt like such a heavy demand. A part of me knew that I should not have protected it, and yet...

“Or have I judged you wrong, was it not my name that you were after?” Thomas said, as if names were a thing that you could collect, and people were merely the inconvenience associated with them, his tone almost mocking the idea of Kaeden being anything other than the name he possessed to me.

And yet I still hesitated, the name refusing to leave my mouth.

“Alice,” Thomas spoke, his voice so distinctly different from the way that Kaeden said my name, and his demeanor... His hands were on my shoulders and upper arm, his body trapping mine as I looked up at him and it became all too clear how much weight he placed upon the idea of what name I would have stolen from someone else.

A part of me almost felt like the insistence on having me answer that single question was the equivalent of rubbing my face in the dirt.

“... Hart,” I said after a moment, wanting it all to be over. “If I had to choose, it would have been Hart,” I stated, hating the way that the words tumbled from my mouth and the way that I felt saying them.

Alice Emily Hart was a different person, I had to tell myself. One who did not put others first. Alice J. Grey would not be her. Alice J. Grey would not be anyone like her, she would be someone else entirely, a woman of desperation and self-sacrifice, that was far better for me.

All of this, in the end, would be far better for me. Even if it did not feel like it. Even if it all felt terrible and foreboding.

I told myself that everything felt terrible and foreboding when you dreaded it as I did, and that rooms seemed far smaller when you grew as nervous as I was, and the lights seemed dimmer, and the guards so far away as you looked up and accepted the fact that it was something very strange that you’d chosen to do.

Something that you felt worse and worse about by the second.

Not that Thomas would ever pretend to care about my distress at a moment such as that.

“Alice J. Grey, and I, Thomas A. Caard,” he said, his eyes lingering on mine. “And it is my name that you wish to take?” Thomas asked then, though it did not sound like a question. In fact, I hardly thought that anything he said at all at that moment sounded like a question, not then. Not between the two of us.

There had been no going back since the start. I didn’t know when the start was, if it had all begun there in the basement, or perhaps in the Gardens of Cards when we had first met. But there we were, and we could never look back again.

“I will take it,” I said, though the words tasted bitter and acidic on my tongue, as the notion of his name mixed with my own made me sick. I

could only close my eyes and hope for the best, praying that this was not a mistake, that it all would not go horribly wrong.

But those two things only could have happened if it were someone else standing there in front of me. If someone else waited for me to tilt back my head then, touching me tenderly instead of hardly bothering to interact with me at all. It would have only worked if it were not Thomas, of all people. I knew that.

Things would not go horribly wrong if it weren't Thomas Caard who I agreed to marry—I should have known that there was no way that the actions I took could have possibly been categorized as anything but a mistake at that moment.

It would have been so different from the fleeting press of his lips upon mine, and the sharp sting of cold metal against my finger if it weren't Thomas. Perhaps if it were someone else, and it was destined to end well, the kiss would have been tender and the metal a smooth caress. Perhaps, if it were someone else, my dress would have been finer, my hair done up. I would have worn make up or thought to look alive as he pulled back from me.

I would have at the very least felt like I could breathe. Like the wind that came did not tear the breath straight out of me and leave me standing all alone. I would have not felt the chill up my back as I opened my eyes. I would not have found the door to my cell to be wide open, and the guards in the hall gone.

I would not have found the ring I lost just six months prior sitting upon my hand, still as large and ostentatious as always, but this time even more off-putting, the sight of it making me freeze entirely, my eyes going wide as I stared at my hand.

And I knew then. I knew.

That's why I ran.

ALICE AND THE QUEEN OF CARDS

My mind went blank as I took off through the Hearts Dungeons, scarcely sparing so much as a thought as to what I was doing, nor as to who would see me running. All I could focus on was the understanding that I'd come to—the fact that whatever had just happened? Whatever I'd just done?

It was bad. Very, very bad.

Catastrophically bad, if one were to qualify it, for I did not see a single guard within the halls of the dungeon nor half of the prisoners, and a part of me wondered if the ones I did see in the beginning had been real to begin with, or rather some grand illusion. One that not even the Caterpillar and the Duchess had known about, considering the comfort and ease with which the Duchess had walked behind me as I descended the steps into the dungeon, watching me with a gloating smile that most certainly would not be worn if she knew the guards she followed to be anything less than real.

The Duchess knew everything. When she didn't have her ear to the wind to catch the faintest hint of new gossip that had only just begun to form; she was waiting at her windowsill, her eyes trained to the skies as she eagerly anticipated the next issue of the Wonderland Wanderer and whatever yellow tinted news would leak from its pages. She asked questions far too often, and was quite rude about it; which was surprisingly a boon when gathering information—and she made assumptions. Far too many assumptions.

So many that it was only an inevitability that one or two of them would be true as the Duchess trained her eyes upon her unlikely victims, watching for the slightest hint of any sort of reaction.

I doubted the Caterpillar could hide the true state of the guards from her, nor any other plots—especially Thomas’s actions.

Erwic had spoken of unity in Cards, and he held far more respect for the rules of the land than anyone else did, even if he were constantly manipulating the situation to encourage me to break them. There was no way that he could have known. Not in those final moments within the cell, in which he so gloatingly declared himself a queen maker.

It didn’t make sense, but neither did the flicker of light or the ring sitting upon my hand, nor the missing guards, or the way that brick by brick just below my feet, the yellowish gray of the large stone tiles in the uppermost layer of the Hearts dungeon began to fade to gray.

Actually, far more than that lost its color.

Paint almost seemed to drip from the walls behind me as I rushed up the aged wooden staircase that led down to the Hearts’ dungeon, afraid of what might happen to me if I were to slow down even slightly and be touched by whatever curse had begun to drain color from the dungeons. I allowed myself only a glimpse back at the cells before I swung myself from the landing onto the final remaining staircase, my eyes catching on someone else for only a moment before I made the far too difficult choice to rush ahead, having hardly the time nor trust to stop for the one prisoner that remained, even as he called after me.

“Don’t leave me here—” Oliver Stamma hissed as he dove aggressively towards his bars, his eyes trained on me with the expectation that I would turn back for him even when I took the staircase four steps at a time. “Alice, you come back here and tell me what you’ve done—” The White Knight demanded, but he was wholly wrong if he thought I would turn back for him.

He was wholly wrong if he thought I would turn back for anyone at that moment as I ripped the door to the dungeons open, somewhat astonished to find it unlocked, and just as quickly slammed it closed behind me, wrenching the heavy iron bar that was intended to block the door from opening down and willing myself to believe, for only a second, that it was the end of whatever mess had begun to happen.

It seemed like it was for a moment, granted it was an exceedingly short moment, but a moment all the same during which I braced myself in front of the dungeon door and willed whatever was consuming it to stay out.

Unfortunately, will, it seemed, was no longer a formidable magic within Wonderland—or at least within Cards.

“—Ava!” I shrieked no sooner than had I fastened the locks on the door, only to find that the dark ruby-red wood that sat just beneath my fingertips was rapidly bleaching white from the bottom up, and that I had to practically throw myself backwards to avoid making contact with the stark, bleached white surface of the door only a moment later; the once vibrantly painted wood soon beginning to splinter and crack as I could only sit and gawk—

Until I remembered myself, and the fact that I was not simply a spectator to this strange phenomenon and could very well become a victim of it if I did not quickly struggle to my feet and find a way out.

“Fitz will be gone, William will be drunk, and Claude is currently missing,” I reminded myself as I practically ran in circles trying to find a way out. “Erwic will be surrounded, the Duchess detests me, Roisin has disappeared, Bram may very well be dead, and I have just left Oliver—who was looking rather near dead—in a rather unfortunate situation,” I admitted, wincing as the door continued to crack and the color devouring tide slowly began to leak in from under the foot of the door.

Alternate names to the one that I wanted to rush to were preferable, all things considered, on account of the fact that to go to Kaeden at that very moment meant to admit what I had done, and to admit what I had done was to admit that whatever it was, whatever tragedy I had willed into existence in a single moment of vulnerability, it was *something*.

And somethings were never good.

But nothings were far worse.

I was desperately grasping at straws as I tried to come up with new names, having only one remaining on the tip of my tongue, his company and help far less than desirable. “The March Hare,” I muttered under my breath as I finally made to head towards an exit, deeming the growing pool of white that slowly crept closer and closer to my feet to be some sort of hazard as I rushed towards a slightly familiar gallery, only to find the paintings unmoving, and the long, stretching hallway to be almost hauntingly empty.

I told myself that I was heading towards Bartley, the drunken hare who I barely knew; but if I were being honest with myself, I already knew that he would not be much help.

“William, then,” I told myself as I neared the first hall that branched off of mine, resigning myself to go to the tearoom in my hunt for William. With any luck, he would be there. With any luck, he would listen to me and somehow fix the whole situation with some sort of discretion and—

I spun on my heel in the middle of the hall and turned to look behind me, wondering where else had become devoid of color in this short span of time. “Who am I kidding?” I questioned myself as I gritted my teeth and anxiously eyed the hallway behind me, knowing that the longer I waited, the more ground was covered.

I would have liked to believe in William right then, I really would have. If Wonderland were set up in any sensible sort of way, he would have been the King whether he liked to or not—he would have been responsible and sensible, trustworthy and resourceful.

But he was not.

He was not any of those things, and he’d never done much to help me, always putting himself first and everyone else last. He wouldn’t help with anything, really, I had to face that fact as I stared down the hall, listening as doors and tiles cracked all around me. I had to make a choice, but I already knew the answer, seeing as how I always made the same decision, no matter what it cost me.

“Kaeden,” I decided without a doubt in my mind, doubling back in spite of the danger that followed not all that far behind and knowing that wherever he went and whatever he did, he was undoubtedly situated upwards, past the grand staircase and most of my chances of escape.



IN SPITE OF THE EMPTY FIRST FLOOR, PEOPLE FLOODED THE SECOND AND third levels, as well as much of the fourth, crowding the halls as they stood seemingly unaware of what was coming far too closely behind me, and while I may have liked to tell them then, I knew how it would go the moment that the sea of grey was spotted.

My theory had been reaffirmed on the second floor, and I scarcely needed to listen as I left the third to know that the exact same thing had happened there as well—panic. Blind, all-encompassing panic expressed wholly irrationally without even the slightest hint of a thought as to what

were far more preferable actions to perform, such as not deciding to crowd the staircases, nor dive for the paintings. More than that, not deciding to hide behind decorations and pretend that one was not there—that was preferable.

Really, nearly anything was preferable to the madness that ensued as I reached the end of every floor, closing my eyes and gritting my teeth as the first calls began to ring out, alarming not only the servants, but members of the courts as well. Those members of the courts seemed bound and determined to linger on every floor, shoving others aside the moment a call so much as hit the air in desperate attempts to save themselves, always completely unaware of a single fact as they fought their way to the downward staircase and I braced myself to climb upwards to a new floor—

“There is no way down,” a member of the Chiropteran court, a snub nosed bat who I had seen far too many times before remarked as he stared at where the bright red carpets that hung upon the southwestern Hearts staircase turned white, and I knew what he would do next before he even did it, because a dog on the second floor had tried it as well when he looked back and spotted me practically hauling myself along the upper bound staircase—“Up,” he said, shoving the others aside as he fought his way towards my staircase and was propelled onwards by the push of the crowd behind him. “Up,” he said, and so it went, the crowd thickening behind me with little regard, growing closer and closer as I neared the fourth floor, their feet a ruthless tide of ambition as each and every one of them struggled not to fall behind, for not a single person who had fallen behind had come back and no one wanted to know what that meant.

Not when they fought and struggled to retain their places on the staircases, several arguments of ranking beginning to ring out behind me as I neared the entrance of the fourth floor, confused to find that door, of all of them, shut.

The topmost floor of the library, where the commonfolk collection sat, laid there, constantly frequented by a wide assortment of people from all throughout Hearts. People who came at all hours of the day.

“I am a duke—” a voice began to call, completely blind to the way that I slowed ahead of him.

“I am a judge—” Another argued as I stared at the door, propelled onward only by the push of bodies behind me.

The fourth-floor door was never closed. Not once in the time I'd been residing in Hearts.

How anyone could manage to continue moving behind me as they stood face to face with the sight of that, I did not know. How anyone could keep charging and will themselves to believe that all would soon be well, I did not know.

The door was locked. I don't know how I knew it, but I knew it. The door was locked, and I highly doubted anyone would have a key nor the foresight to use it. Not when the first people to reach the door were immediately swallowed by the crowd that soon followed.

"A lock!" A voice cried.

"A lock!" Another two or three replied.

"A lock?" A judge who I recognized to be a member of the Crown Court pried, struggling to fight other people, pushing them to the side as he pressed on ahead, followed by an elephant in a suit and tie with a look of horror upon his face. "Pretend that it is not there—" he tried, only to for once have his opinion swallowed in a sea of so many others.

"Ask it to change its mind."

"Someone sing in an upbeat key."

"Put the door somewhere else," another voice replied, and while that would have been quite the novel solution if there were even a chance of it working, I could not help but look back at the staircase, my heartbeat racing. We did not have time for this, we did not have time for silly little childish games.

"—Knock the door down," I demanded, though nobody could so much as bother to hear me. "Knock the door down!" I tried once more, my voice breaking into a scream, but still nobody would listen to me, sending my blood into a boil as I looked at the crowd surrounding me and knew that not a single one was noticing me. "I said," I inhaled, gripping onto the banister behind me for dear life as more and more people continued to crowd the landing, shoving me into the bannisters. "Knock. The. Door. Down," I hollered, my voice roaring high above the crowd in that single instance...

All voices quieted, and all refusal faded away, the whole of the staircase looking back at me as if only just realizing what I had commanded, though not stating the reason why they did so, nor even

giving an indication that they would before they all turned back to the door to do as I said.

The only hint as to why they stopped squabbling were the two cards that unceremoniously plopped themselves onto the ground in front of me as the Wonderlanders tended to ramming open the doors.

Two cards that I had never seen before, the faces of them twisted in a fear worse than I could ever imagine.

“The Queen of Cards,” I breathed, hardly even hearing when the heavy wooden doors cracked in front of me, nor when the masses of people charged on by.

It was only when white and grey climbed to the final step of the landing and the crowd began to dissipate that I found myself capable of even beginning to look up, my eyes breaking through the people to meet with another’s as the very same realization very evidently hit him.

Kaeden did not so much as blink as he stared at me, his face growing pale as his shoulders raised high—the terror of a new King of Cards having only just begun.

REFLECTIONS OF THE HEART

I could see the thoughts racing behind Kaeden's eyes as he looked at me, his mind very evidently putting the pieces together, but nary a sound escaping him as he rushed towards me, moving with little regard for anyone else as he drew near. His eyes never left the cards and scarcely even regarded my face as the two small pieces of paper fell from my hands and floated away.

"We have to go," he said, and yet I could scarcely comprehend such a statement when what little I knew of my previously comfortable reality was quickly slipping away. "Alice, we have to go," Kaeden repeated, but I could not so much as begin to move, pulling away as his hand reached for my wrist. "Alice," he said, and yet it all felt so far away and foreign when what I thought to never be possible had actually began.

"But he is not... There are only four," I said, because for so long, that is what I had been told. I'd overheard rumors of another, of a bastard amongst the lot, and yet the concept seemed so far away and uncertain even as the staircase that I had previously stood upon turned completely white—proof that it was real and that it was Thomas who had caused all of this to begin, sending the future barreling on forwards with only a kiss.

One could hardly deny the fact that Thomas had played a part in it all when the color had begun to fade from the dungeons mere seconds after I had given him my name.

"Alice." I could scarcely even hear Kaeden as he repeated himself, attempting one final time to regain my attention before giving up entirely.

There was no point in trying to reach me, he had to realize, nor in explaining where he was going. Not when I had already drifted so far from

him, my whole body going stiff with the fear of it all. He could only lead me along and force me to follow, navigating the halls of his estate with complete certainty as he carved out an unfamiliar path, not so much as considering questioning me.

There was no point in critically examining my actions when the cruel aftereffects had already begun, I supposed.

I could hardly even will myself to follow Kaeden, nor to force my feet to move as he relentlessly pulled me along, unwilling to leave me behind, even when met with only silence.

“You have to listen to me Alice, you have to go,” Kaeden said as he continued on with the relentless march, his eyes darting rapidly from empty picture frame to empty picture frame hanging upon the wall. “You have to do exactly as I say, and you have to leave, and swear to me that you will do your best not to return. You must never come back,” he insisted, as if the words he spoke were simple, sensible commands that everyone should find it easy enough to follow, rather than what they really were—nonsense. Complete and utter nonsense that he babbled as the two of us moved through the Hearts’ Estate walls, diving deeper and deeper into the unknown. “Alice, I need you to listen to me,” he demanded, even as the air felt thinner, and the creaking of wood sounded deep in the background. “Tell me that you are listening to me,” he insisted, spiriting me along a long, narrow patch of passageway.

“How can I listen when the words you say hardly make sense,” I said distantly, my mind wandering further and further away as my heartbeat kept racing on. The lightness of my voice must have alarmed him then, as he spared me far more than a glance as he rounded another corner and kept pulling me along. “How can I listen when none of this makes sense,” I said, my eyes scarcely leaving the ground. “How can I think of leaving anywhere, when it sounds like you will not be coming with?” I whispered, though the sheer irony of the fact that I had already done something far more sinister in marrying Thomas rather than him was not lost upon me, nor did I imagine it was lost upon Kaeden.

I had only planned to be apart from Kaeden for fear of his disappointment, and the rejection that would likely follow it, but now that everything was left in such a state, and the world that I had slowly begun to love had fallen apart with both the Crown Court and the Duchess far out of sight as it did so? I wanted Kaeden.

I needed him.

And yet he spoke so strangely as he carried me along with him, tearing open doors and vanishing further and further into a labyrinth, his voice distant and strained as he hardly looked at me.

I could scarcely think to not reach for Kaeden then, my eyes begging him not to abandon me behind as he pulled shut the thickened wood of a heavy red door; one that I had seen before.

One that had served as the prequel to the worst night of my life, the very sight of it making me pause, my mind hardly considering the notions of creeping grayscale or taunting jester cards as I was forced back into a familiar room; one that belonged to a very different Queen in the Kingdom of Cards.

One that Kaeden alone would always have access to.

“Alice,” he pleaded, having braced the door shut heavily behind him as he dared me to deny him.

As if I would not.

As if the sight of that room, the Queen of Hearts’ room with her four-poster bed and her velveteen sheets, would stop me. As if the reality of the fact that I had been there only a month prior and lost nearly everything as a result would not stick with me.

As if the green tint of the Jabberwock’s mirror luring me in from the corner of the room would entice me not to argue with him when, in the face of certain death and uncertain consequences during that day alone, I had already done so much to protect him.

I could not walk away from him without knowing that he was safe. I could not say goodbye to Kaeden, not in that way.

“Say that you’re coming with me,” I argued as the question of whether he could shoot himself through space and time itself lingered while the cracks of splintering wood and shattering tiles drifted in from the hall.

“Alice,” he pleaded, his hands raising to grasp my forearms as he tried to guide me away from the door gently, likely knowing all too well that I would push back at him.

“Wherever you are sending me, whatever this does—say that you are coming with me,” I demanded, struggling against his hold as he backed me closer and closer to the mirror.

“Alice,” Kaeden said again, his jaw clenching and his eyes softening as he took me in; really took me in, his eyes scanning the entirety of my

facial features far too carefully, even as a scowl formed upon my mouth, and I shook my head frantically at him.

“Kaeden,” I said then, because two could play at that game, and it was all too easy for me to say his name just as he said mine, with the same level of scolding and affirmation as well as genuine affection and concern for him. “Kaeden, I am begging you,” I said as he took another step towards me, pushing me towards the mirror just as the reality of the fact that the grey was there, and that it was spreading across the floor hit me. “Kaeden,” I said, though this time I begged, my throat tightening and my stomach dropping all the same.

I would take him with me, I swore. I would have him there. I would not lose him, I would not forfeit him, I would not live even one day without him; I could not. Not anymore.

“I love you,” Kaeden’s voice came as no more than a whisper at that moment as he pushed. He winced as my foot touched the bottom of the frame, but did not relent. “Alice, I love you,” he reaffirmed, and yet, it did not soften me at all, nor inspire me to stop shoving back against him with my fingers locking in the fabric of his clothes.

I could not stop when he stood so close to me, remaining just within my grasp. I could not let go then, I could not let go ever.

Not for the grey that had begun to devour the Queen’s chambers, nor the desperation that showed plainly upon his features. I could not so much as dream of letting go of him as he pushed me back into the mirror and braced his hand overhead, having firmly made up his mind on what needed to be done and using the only tool he had left in his arsenal against me as a result—the affection that I held for him.

“I love you, Alice,” he said, pressing himself closer against me and willing me to look at him and only him instead, ignoring the changes around me and the green gleam of the mirror. I could hardly even notice the way that the grey itched closer to his leg, turning his foot to stone as it climbed; not when Kaeden was so close to me, his lips mere inches from mine. “Alice,” he reaffirmed, his hand upon my chin to tilt my gaze away as his other hand still sat braced against the mirror-like doorway.

And then he did it, that one simple thing.

The only way that he could have ever coerced me into loosening my grip on him. The only way that he ever could have hoped to distract me from the reality of what was happening to him and all around me in

Wonderland as the reign of Thomas Caard, a man once known as the Joker, began.

He kissed me one final time and whispered those words, the ones I wished never to hear again. “I’m sorry, Alice,” Kaeden said as my fingers reached towards him, trying desperately to once again gain purchase on him.

I hardly remembered letting go of him to begin with, and stood baffled as my body began sinking back into the mirror, almost falling through the glass as Kaeden braced himself on the frame of it. In one last final move of desperation, I reached to grab his neck and haul myself back to him, only to find that my hands slipped.

And then I was falling. Falling once again. Falling and spinning and scrambling far too desperately to grab something, anything to keep me in Wonderland—only to find that all of my actions were to no avail.

I never had any hope of stopping myself as I fell back through the mirror and onto the hard stone floor of the Bodleian. I landed on my rump in the Duke Humfrey’s library; a place I had once played as a child, that no longer felt quite as magical and astonishing as it had been before. Not when reality set in and I looked up at the large, green tinted mirror in front of me. My hands immediately reached to frantically pound against the glass as my final glimpse of Wonderland, and the life I had once had, began to fade away, turning to stone under the terror of a grey tide.

A tide that I had helped to create with my rashness in decisions—and one that I could scarcely begin to process as a harsh scream clawed at the back of my throat and begged to come out. The reality of my situation hit me as the eyes on the other side of the mirror levelled with mine and a simple, short declaration of love was lost on wordless lips.

Kaeden turned to stone right before my eyes.

I was in Oxford once more, staring back at a mirror as the love of my life and his little slice of Wonderland froze in time; leaving me trapped in England with no way to return.

LOOKING FOR MORE?

You didn't think that was all, did you?

Read the Hart's Curse (The King of Heart's Prologue) and stay up to date on when the last book in the Alice: Pick a Card series is released [here](#).

You can also sign up for my newsletter to receive updates about upcoming releases [here](#).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

B. A. Lovejoy is a longtime reader of romance novels and occasionally writes a few herself. She specializes in fantasy romance and has a great interest in magic users and men with crooked smiles.

When she is not writing romance novels, she is a devoted dog mother, amateur seamstress, and succulent collector. Find exclusive bonus content and news about future releases on her website, Bethanyannelovejoy.com